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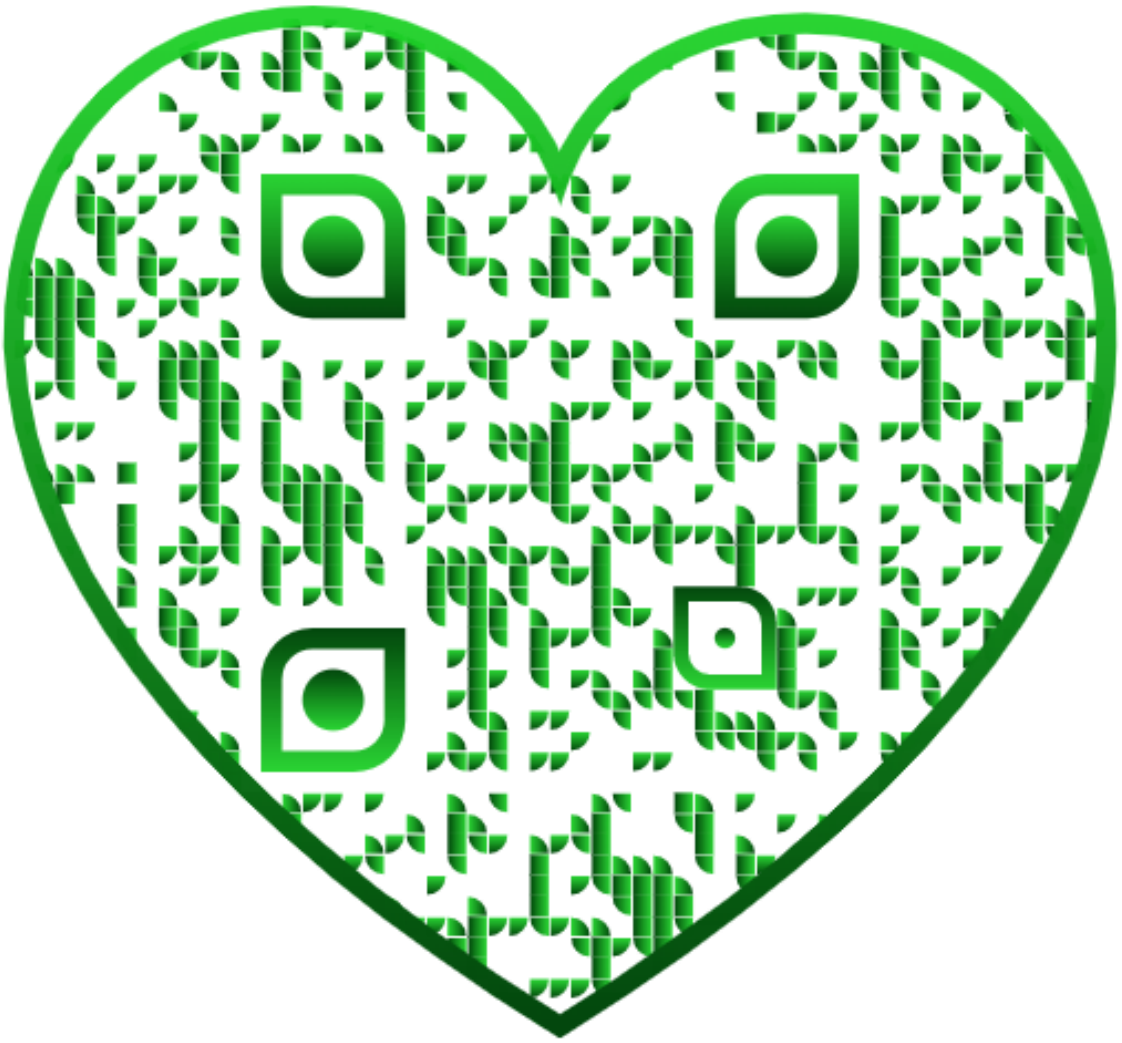

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EDITORIAL

With Bruce deciding for some unfathomable reason that he would rather be in Canada for a fortnight than sat helping put the finishing touches to this issue, a brief power struggle ensued between the remaining editorial team. Fortunately, having youth, dexterity, good looks and the best hair on my side, I emerged triumphant and seized power to write my third editorial for this magnificent publication. Since I joined ten years ago for FW#15, I can say the magazine has grown in size, stature and sales. Some could argue that rather than my presence boosting the Fireworks brand, it was because we started bagging big names like Kiss, Alice Cooper, Whitesnake, Foreigner and the like to grace our pages, but you can draw your own conclusions.

The quality of music already in 2015 is jaw dropping, with veterans like UFO and Scorpions continuing to put out strong new albums. Toto roll back the years with their latest effort, while younger bands like Eclipse just keep on improving. Then you have acts like Revolution Saints springing up and releasing an album that has knocked all of our socks off. Not a bad start!

On the subject of quality music, Rocktopia Records launched last year and put out two crackers with In Faith's debut album 'There's A Storm Coming' and Ten's return to form 'Albion'. Both albums garnered excellent reviews and Ten are already hard at work on their follow up.

While we're talking music, we have listed the genres we write about on the front cover. We used to have 'The Melodic Rock Magazine' as our strapline but as the magazine has evolved, that's a bit of a misnomer. Sure, we still have plenty of Melodic Rock, but we also have Prog, Metal, AOR, Symphonic, Blues... you'll do well to find a more diverse selection in one publication. If you like Rock, buy Fireworks and if you can't find something you like in these pages, we're not offering money back - we're keeping your cash as compensation for your appalling lack of taste.

We have a stack of new, exclusive interviews over at www.rocktopia.co.uk. Check them out, they're free! And don't forget, Fireworks is also available in the US and Canada – we'd all appreciate you spreading the word, regardless of your location - via Facebook, Twitter, in pubs, at gigs, with friends... if you have no friends, tell strangers!

Finally, we come to the much talked about centrefold depicting my gorgeous self. Women the world over have been asking for it since I first mentioned the idea. Well, one person on Facebook asked why it hasn't graced the pages yet. And it was a man. But regardless, someone was asking. That ol' stick in the mud Bruce steadfastly insists we print interviews and reviews about great music and my so called colleagues haven't helped – it's a poisonous den of snakes here at Fireworks, all back stabbing and politicking. So screw it, how about a mail order calender? We'll take pre-orders now via the usual address. Once we get enough (ie more than one) I'll look at getting them made. Just imagine - it could adorn housewife's kitchens and jail cells everywhere!

James

MICHAEL VOSS & MARK SWEENEY'S

WOLFPAKK

Wolfpakk is a project put together by Mark Sweeney, formally of Swiss rockers Crystal Ball and Michael Voss probably best known for his work with Mad Max, Silver and with Michael Schenker on his 2011 'Temple of Rock' album. 'Rise Of The Animal' is the third album from the pair as the mainstays of the Wolfpakk project, but it also incorporates a multitude of friends and guests to join in the fun, particularly in sharing the vocals and some great lead guitar work. Not being familiar with the previous two Wolfpakk albums, but having reviewed 'Rise Of The Animal' elsewhere in this issue, Ian Parry took the opportunity to put a few questions to Mark.

Firstly, how did you meet and make the whole Wolfpakk project come together?

Well, it was actually around the time of my second solo album ('All In', released in 2010). I had known Michael already before - he sung some backing vocals for my band Crystal Ball – but although we had kept in good contact, we hadn't really worked together on a record. On finishing my second solo album though, where he was involved, he visited me in Switzerland and we had a great barbecue. You know, my solo CD is quite calm and easy stuff, so I was really hot to Rock again. I also missed good 80s Hard Rock, so I asked Michael if we could maybe do something together in this vein. He was instantly up for it and made the proposal of inviting some guest musicians from the scene to spice this project a bit. Michael knows 'all the world and his wife', so this was just the beginning of our collaboration. Later on, we called the project Wolfpakk, because we wanted to invite as many musicians as possible. We are the alpha-wolves, the guests are the Pakk.

So how much of the album do you play and sing yourselves?

The basic concept behind Wolfpakk has always been that Michael and I write all the songs, then we look for our guests who then sing or play a part in our songs. Sometimes more, sometimes less. This album is a further extension of that. You will always find Michael's and my voice in every song on the album, but Michael also plays guitars and bass. He's multi-talented. All in all, I would say that this record took five or six weeks, including mastering. I usually fly to Germany to see Michael two or three times a year and there we write songs in his recording studio pretty intensively. We also send our ideas via email first and then work this out in his studio later. This one was not done in one session but the time was effectively invested.

Is there any reasons why you want to keep it as a 'Project' with so many guests rather than putting a permanent band together?

Well, basically, it is simply the concept of Wolfpakk to get as many guests as possible. And it's just fantastic. It's wonderful to see how many great musicians and singers we have again on 'Rise Of The Animal'. We ask them and if they are OK, they are on the record. If they don't wanna join in, we keep looking for others. Of course we don't have contacts to the whole music world but I guess we've had some very, very interesting and famous guests on our records up 'til now, and I'm very proud of that!

And is it easy to pull all the guest appearances together?

Yes, most of the guests we've had have their own studios so nowadays it's easy to send the records via the internet/email to each other. I don't think it would be possible to have that many guests on just one record if not. But some musicians did take up our invitation and come to Michael's studio in Germany, which was lovely. Axel Rudi Pell and Barend Courbois from Blind Guardian both came.

How about playing live, is there any prospect of having a touring band to take the music on the road?

Yes, and actually we'd love to. At the moment it's still too early to go out with Wolfpakk. I guess we should release one more record, then, we will see if there are any proposals. It's not that easy to go on the road with all the guest stars, or at least with some of it, but if the right time and organisation can be put in place, I'd love to do it. We will see what the future brings.

Do you write with a particular singer/ guitarist in mind, or once a song is written how do you decide who could sing or play on it?

The song definitely comes first. You never really know until you've nailed the song. Once a song is written and recorded, we then start looking for the musicians and singers that will fit it.

But is it difficult to then have the same level of progression and continuity from album to album, with so many different contributors?

[Laughs] We will see. I hope so. I see you are very sceptical. We are certainly not. We write songs and lyrics, record it and then we see who can feature on our work.

Are there any favourite contributions, or ones that exceeded your expectations this time?

Well, in my opinion all the guests are a coup for us! It would be simply not fair just to pick out one or more names, because everybody who joined Wolfpakk on this was a blast for us! Listen to the record; I really think that it fits so perfectly. From the first to the last song it's just homogeneous.

Any guests that you wanted but couldn't get this time?

Yes, there are some: James Hetfield, Brian Johnson, Bruce Dickinson… [Laughs]

No, seriously. Michael Sweet was one of my favourites, but he was busy like hell and he couldn't follow the 'Pakk. And sadly we had no response from Doro Pesch or Jorn Lande. I understand that some musicians are too busy or not interested in Wolfpakk, but we won't give up!

Mark may have detected a hint of initial scepticism about an album with twelve vocalists and ten guitarists, but having had the chance to live with the album for a couple of weeks I can only echo Mark's comments – listen to the record. From first to last song, it's a blast.

GUN

Brothers Giuliano and Dante Gizzi have been the driving force behind Glasgow rockers Gun for over twenty five years. This year sees the release of their new studio album 'Frantic' and Sue Ashcroft met up with Giuliano (Jools) for a catch up on all things Gun.

It's been a couple of years since your last album, but you're just about to release 'Frantic'. Tell me about how that came to be.

We've done a lot of touring and a lot of festivals with it and it's taken us to certain countries that we've never been to before. We toured with The Cult amongst others and, by the time we'd finished with all that, we thought okay, it's time to write another record. Obviously there was some politics with labels, etc. We had to sit back and ask ourselves were we happy with everything last time around and no, we weren't. So, we just took a step back and gathered our thoughts. First of all, before we started anything, before we went looking for a label or whatever, we wanted to write another record. Dante, Paul (MacManus) and I got together, listened to a lot of music – bands that we'd all grown up with and a lot of new stuff.

You've just recorded the video for the first single from 'Frantic' – tell me a bit about that?

Well, this is just a giveaway single just to connect with the fans, the media and everybody who's going to be involved with this campaign. It's a song called 'Labour Of Life'. It was one of the latter songs that we wrote on the album; we found this old Motown beat that we really liked and I started jamming over it. Dante came up with the words and he, Paul and I just worked on it and it turned out really well. The video has a great concept behind it… but you'll have to wait until it's out before you see it, but I think it's going to be good. It's got go-go dancers in it!

You did the album playback and press launch at the Glasgow Film Theatre, which is quite a prestigious venue.

Yes, it's an iconic film theatre. We were sitting around with our manager and he suggested that it was a great venue to get our fans and press and media to come and hang out, listen to the album playback and then do an acoustic session. Of course, the album sleeve is shot in the GFT too, so it all ties in.

You have the upcoming tour in March.

Yeah, getting back out there and doing the gigs in Manchester and London, Newcastle and Nottingham – great Rock cities, good fan base there, but it'll be the first time we've played the Barrowlands in Glasgow since 1998. We're all pleasantly surprised at the amount of tickets we've sold for it so far.

Last year, you played in quite a few countries across Europe. How was that?

Yeah, we did Spain and Germany, went down to Portugal and then over to Croatia and we went to Azerbaijan. You wouldn't believe the great fans who really appreciate Rock music over there. There aren't many Rock bands that go there. It costs money to go on tour, drive a tour bus, have a crew, etc. When you go to these places, you just don't know what to expect. The promoter phones you and goes "come play for us – it'll be amazing" and because it comes from our agent here, you take his word for it. Then you get there, and on the night, ok, you get paid, you break even or whatever. But the fact is, these fans come and see you and if you play a good set and blow them away, then next thing you know, they're on your Facebook and Twitter and it builds up your fan base. It's not all about Radio 1 and Radio 2, it's all about the social networking now. It's great when you get back to the bus and all the fans who saw you that night are posting about it. They won't forget what a good time they had and hopefully they'll buy a single or an album.

You've all managed to still keep up a great energy on stage. Do you look after yourselves?

We try our best. Touring's a nightmare though. Before the gig there'll be press to do, which is great because you want to talk to people about your record or whatever, but after that, before you know it, it's stage time! Then, you're hungry, but you don't want to eat because you're just about to go on, and there's nothing in the dressing room anyway. You think "well I'll eat after the show", but then you're starving and you want to go out and eat but because you're so hungry, you eat all the wrong things. So, it can be like that for days and days. When we're at home, it's a lot easier because you can control it obviously, go to the gym, etc. but on the road is always going to be difficult. You always try to watch what you're eating, but it's hard. When you get off stage and maybe there are four or five pizzas and a crate of beer, you just want to get stuck in! We take a lot of Berrocca to give us energy during the day, which helps a lot, but you don't want to eat nothing during the day because you're running on empty then. Yeah, it's hard going.

So, who is in the band this time around, apart from you, Dante and Paul?

Well, Johnny McGlynn is still our other guitar player and he's been with us for the last four years and we love him. He lives in Ireland and it's always difficult to get him over for rehearsals and stuff, but when he's here, he's over for a good length of time and it's great. We have recruited a bass player called Andy Carr. He's got his own band called The Toi, who are a really good band – great guys. Paul spotted him at a gig about three years ago. He's been here six months now and he's absolutely loving it. We took him to Spain with us to do a few shows and I don't think he realised how popular we were down there. There was a big gig in Madrid. Our new label is Caroline, which is a subsidiary of Universal and they got on board with it and got a radio station to plug the gig and it was sold out! All the other gigs were jam packed, but Andy just never thought that anywhere other than Glasgow would be like that. I think he was just blown away.

Are you planning on touring elsewhere?

Absolutely! As I said, with Caroline as our new label, it's basically part of Universal and we've had emails in from our German, Spanish, French and Scandinavian labels to all try and make it possible. The album will be released all through Europe and, with the press behind it, the shows should start coming in. You have to play to your strengths – where the album is selling well, so hopefully we'll get a bit of luck. The best thing about being in a band is getting up and playing live, so here's hoping we get to do more of it!

After Norwegian Glam Rock superstars Wig Wam announced their split in March 2014, singer Åge Sten Nilsen, otherwise known as Glam, hooked up with ace songwriter, producer and Eclipse front-man Erik Mårtensson to form a new band, Ammunition. In anticipation of the release of debut album 'Shanghaied', Ant Heeks had a chat with Åge to find out more about the collaboration and the reasons behind the demise of his former band.

I understand you've just done a Christmas tour?

I wouldn't call it a Christmas tour as such, but during Christmas sometimes we pick up the Queen show and do what we call a Christmas Spectacular. It's always sold out. We've been running this show for over seven years now.

But is Rock music your first love?

Definitely, if you think about the last ten years and the things I've done! When I did my solo album 'Glamunition', we were supposed to record 'Non Stop Rock'n'Roll' in 2008, I cancelled all of the shows and everything I was doing just to record this album due to be released in 2009, but the producer, who also happened to be the guitar player in Wig Wam (Trond Holter, a.k.a. Teeny), postponed it because he was doing his Dracula project instead, so that stuffed up the whole year. So we wouldn't be able to tour in 2009 and I had three months off, I needed to do something so I went into the studio and used songs I wouldn't be able to use in Wig Wam, and I sure didn't want to mess things up for Wig Wam. I could have recorded a Rock'n'Roll album but why compete with your Mother band?

As you've mentioned Wig Wam, I'd like to talk about the split. You were very successful, so what went wrong?

Everything! We had a great time in the beginning when we started in 2001. We were more like a cult band back then because this was before The Darkness; that kind of musical style was so outdated, so for people to see a band like us, it was crazy, they couldn't believe their eyes! Basically we were a cover band, we did all kinds of covers from Kiss, AC/DC, Van Halen, all the stuff that we loved and that we hadn't been able to play live for almost eight years because everyone hated it in Norway. We had a good time during that first period, then we started to write original music and made the breakthrough with the Eurovision Song Contest in 2005, which was a great year for us. Then it got crazy, we were constantly touring, and shit happens. In 2007 we decided we really needed a break and needed to spend time away from each other, which was a healthy thing. That's when I started the Queen show that was supposed to be five dates, then it became very successful, while Trond did his own stuff and the other two guys went back to their regular jobs. After that period we started to become strangers to each other and had different plans, it was harder to plan things to remain a team. That was probably the main problem with this band, at some point we started to have different schedules and different plans for ourselves. The final cut was when those guys started this new band and released a new song without telling the other guys in the band about it, and releasing it a week before we released 'Wall Street'. The management went crazy, and the label went crazy! We were a good live act, but it was time for us to do something else because we were kind of repeating ourselves. We tried to find something new, two of the guys wanted to change the band, they thought the appearance and style of the band was too corny maybe? They felt kind of trapped into that concept and of course I understand that. We were kind of trapped, we were like a concept band, but when we tried to change things with 'Wall Street', which was a very schizophrenic album, we kind of lost it.

Are you disappointed that Wig Wam fizzled out rather than being able to go out with a bang?

Yeah, because of the way it was handled, it was a mess. When you think that we worked together for thirteen years with what you might call friends, and you happen to notice that the friends weren't actually friends after all, because friends are supposed to be honest with each other. When I found out that the guys had secretly recorded that Dracula concept behind my back when that was part of our Wig Wam plan, that was when it started to go downhill.

Onto Ammunition then, did you have a specific direction in mind with this album?

No, not at all… Although in some way yes, because when we started out writing the material it was supposed to be demos cut for the next Wig Wam album. When we released 'Wall Street', which was delayed because it was supposed to be released in 2011 so we could go out on tour the next year… but even then Trond was working on his Dracula project, he'd been working on it for seven years and it became his main priority. So when we released 'Wall Street' in 2012 and the guys had released the single with a new band without telling us, we got together for a meeting and talked about what to do. Trond offered us to pick songs from his Dracula album because he had lost

his focus on the project, he couldn't finish it, so he decided to focus on Wig Wam 100 percent. That was when I proposed that we could do it as a Wig Wam album instead, make it like a Rock Opera. So we were supposed to record the album during that summer of 2012 and release it in the fall, then record a regular Wig Wam album later, and that was the album I was focussing on when I started to work with Erik Mårtensson. The songs were dedicated to become a Wig Wam album, we had four songs then, but straight after, it became obvious that Wig Wam would break up. I was thinking about using the songs for a solo project, but Erik and I really got along well and he really wanted to form a band with me; there was definitely something there. We didn't have a plan, we just wrote songs that we felt like we wanted to write. It all just came naturally because we had been listening to a lot of music and having long talks about music so we were kind of feeling we were on the same ground.

Did you know Erik previously?

No, we were talking about using an outside producer for the next Wig Wam album, so I'd been reading a lot about Erik and we admired him as a producer. I thought about calling him but I never did because I thought he wouldn't have the time because he's a very busy producer. So I was actually hooking up with another guy in Stockholm, Tommy Denander, who I was just going to meet in Stockholm to talk about maybe cutting some demos, but he was unable to make it. So this other friend of mine took me to Erik's studio because he had an appointment there. I ended up there at Erik's studio by accident and it happened that he had all our albums. He was a big fan, so that's how it started.

Where did you find all the members of Ammunition?

That was pretty easy. When we decided to start the band we needed a great drummer and as we were recording the album in Stockholm it was pretty handy to have a guy from there and Erik was very keen on using Robban Bäck. I'd never heard of him before he mentioned his name, then we did this show with Nordic Beast in Oslo and Eclipse were supporting us. I really thought that this drummer was great, and he proved to be one of the best drummers I've ever played with. Hal Patino I met through Nordic Beast when I put together that band. We became really good friends, he's someone I admired, a cool guy, great bass player. He'd talked about quitting King Diamond because he was fed up with how that band was being run and the music, he wanted to do more Hard Rock, so when we decided to start this band it became pretty obvious to give him a call. Jon Pettersen, the other guitar player, we'd been working together with the Queen band and we'd also worked in another band in the early nineties. Jon and I have been close friends since the late eighties. Lasse Finbrathen had been the touring keyboard player with Wig Wam and he also did my 'Glamunition' tour. After what I'd experienced with Wig Wam I was very concerned about having people around me that I actually enjoyed working with and spending time with, so that was like fifty percent and the other fifty percent would be being great musicians and being into the same kind of music that I'm into.

Do you think that Ammunition will appeal to a wider audience than Wig Wam did?

I have no idea! My only focus with Ammunition at this point is that we have created some great music that we're proud of and that we're doing what we desire. This is what we love to do. Making this album was a hundred percent honest work. We'll see if people like it and if people want us to go out and play that would be great; we've done some good gigs already and hopefully there'll be a tour. We want to travel all round Europe, we'd love to play the UK, but first we need to know if we'll have an audience to come to the shows. At this point it looks like most of the Wig Wam fans are there still, and those who hated the Wig Wam style will hopefully be able to listen to this music.

Do you think that the image of Wig Wam held you back from obtaining a larger audience?

Oh yeah! We were a show band, kind of like Steel Panther in a way with tongue-in-cheek lyrics, more on the first album than the second and third, but we made some good music and what we were concerned about and focused on was to entertain through humour. Behind that showmanship and the stupid costumes was a great band and more and more people got to discover that, but we have seen and understood that people didn't take us seriously because of the costumes.

Where have you drawn your lyrical inspiration from for the songs on this album?

(Laughs) it's pretty hard to say. When we write the songs sometimes the melodies will take me to the place in that song where the lyric is supposed to be. Like with 'Silverback', when we had the title and the (sings) "Silverback!" chant, that was the first clue and then suddenly the whole pre-chorus came naturally. I was actually singing the lines straight away with the melody, and there it was. Some songs are harder, like 'Wild Kard', that's more like a story from the real world. I mean all musicians and travelling people can connect to it, going away and leaving their loved ones behind, it's a typical "welcome to my life as a musician" kind of statement. 'Shanghaied' is a bit more complex, that's something that came about for 'Non Stop Rock 'n' Roll' actually, we were supposed to do that song then but the other guys said it was too Bluesy or something, I don't know. I finished the last words on it, it's kind of a cool story, you think I'm talking about a teenage girl but it ends up being a lady-boy from Thailand – ooh, watch out! I really like to have fun when I'm writing, if a song can have a tongue-in-cheek lyric that's cool, that's entertaining, but at the same time I also have the need to write about the things I'm concerned about and really need to get out of my system. So there's songs about Wig Wam's break-up there, songs about my marriage going to hell…

One of the highlights of the album is 'Road To Babylon'.

Oh thanks, that's one of the masterpieces on this album I think, I'm really happy with that one. I remember when I played that to the guys, they were like "wow!" and suddenly Erik was singing something and we co-wrote the rest of the song together and it was finished in twenty minutes. That's the cool thing, when you can just play something and people just react to it, and that's what it's all about for me, to be a part of that chemistry. With Wig Wam we never worked that way, we were more like going into the studio, me presenting my songs, you presenting your songs in their demo versions, and I think this is a much cooler way to work, this is buddies who are trying to make each other better and exploring their creative sides without limitations. This is what we really want to do. People ask how we can run a band together, obviously Eric and Robban are in Eclipse, Lasse plays with Circus Maximus, I have my Queen shows and everything, but at the same time this is not a project, it's a band. It's not like we believe that we can go out and tour and play like every day for a year, that's just not how it works, but if we were able we would always find time to do it. We will play as many shows as possible where people want us to come. The cool thing about this band is, with Wig Wam it was pretty hard to play small venues with the show and everything, but with Ammunition we will fit more into small venues, so people can smell us! (laughs) This as all about the music, at the same time we sure like to put on a show. If we could have some pyrotechnics that's cool, but the main thing would be the music, the pyrotechnics at one of our shows just comes from ourselves just exploding on stage!

So is Ammunition a one-off project or are you planning for the future?

Oh yeah, there are going to be plenty of Ammunition albums, guaranteed! You can't run away when you work so well together, we all had a good time. The guys in this band, they're great guys, you can sit down and have a heart to heart and there would never be a feud within the band because we're all grown up people talking to each other. If we have an argument about music that's a good thing, but don't make it personal. We're all into the same kind of music as well. It's going to be an adventure to work with these guys for many years to come.

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THE AMORETTES

It's been a long time since there was a kick ass all girl band out there who really captured the hearts of the Rock fraternity far and wide. I've been following the career of The Amorettes for a few years now, from the first time I saw them at Hard Rock Hell and was completely blown away. Guitarist/vocalist Gill Montgomery along with sisters Heather (bass) and Hannah McKay (drums) are a breath of fresh air. Now, they are about to embark on their first major tour supporting Europe and Black Star Riders. Sue Ashcroft caught up with Heather McKay to find out what makes The Amorettes tick…..

For any of our readers who aren't yet aware of the Amorettes, tell us a little bit about the band, when you were formed and your individual influences.

The band was formed in 2009, Gill and Hannah met whilst studying music at college. After a few different line-ups, we settled with me playing bass as of 2010. Our individual influences are pretty similar... Motorhead, AC/DC, Rose Tattoo, Wasp, Van Halen, Krokus and the like.

You recently played your first headline show at King Tut's in Glasgow - how did that go?

It was a good one! We were pleased with the turnout, especially to sell out our first headline show in Glasgow. Despite a few technical hitches and guitars cutting out it was a hot and sweaty one and a great way to finish off the year!

Last year you also played some fantastic supports and festivals - what else does 2015 have lined up for you apart from this tour?

We are going to kick off in February with the Giants of Rock in Minehead on the 8th, which should be good. I'll be sure to get a photo taken with Dave Hill from Slade – I'm a huge fan - and we will be headlining the Borderline in London on Feb 18th with Planet Rock. We love playing in London! The plan is to get out further afield this year too, looks like we will be doing a festival in the Netherlands as well as a few gigs in France in October like the British Steel fest near Paris. Can't wait to hit Europe!

Your debut album 'Haulin' Ass' was released in 2011. Why has it taken so long for you to record another? Who does the main writing in the band - is it completely a joint endeavour?

Album number two has been a long time coming for sure. The band took a bit of a break at the end of 2012 into 2013 as we were struggling to feel inspired and come up with new stuff. We lost a bit of the spark, but by the end of 2013 we were back into it! I guess in a way we weren't quite sure what direction to take the new songs. We wanted to really up our game, but still keep The Amorettes sound from 'Haulin Ass'. Gill does the majority of the writing and lyrics and we all write our own parts. We like to jam out in the rehearsal studio, it can get rather Progressive at points, but we always seem to come back round to our fast paced heavy style eventually!

You've worked on it with Chris Tsangarides. What was it like to work with such a legend?

We were first introduced to him at Hard Rock Hell 2012 and gave him a copy of our first record. A few years later we got in contact again and it was decided he would help us record and produce our next album. It was a great experience going to his studio in the white cliffs of Dover. We didn't have a massive amount of time and before we started we were assuming we were going to be doing long, stressful days in the studio, however we quickly learned that Chris's style is the complete opposite, many tea breaks and story times were had in-between takes. By the end we had a complete album without even noticing. It was the most relaxing experience we've ever had recording!

You've had a lot of obvious comparisons drawn between yourselves and the likes of The Runaways and Rock Goddess. What's the weirdest band you've ever been compared to?

We've had many comparisons drawn to all the major female bands; Donnas, Runaways, Girlschool, Rock Goddess, even The Bangles - that was a weird one! One of the funniest quotes we will never forget came from Classic Rock magazine who stated that were like "Vardis with vaginas!" But they also said we are like "Airbourne fronted by Joan Jett" so we'll take that one any day!

You love WASP and all things 80s - what is it like when you meet your heroes? Have you managed to keep your composure, or have you ever totally lost it or been tongue-tied when you've met someone you've idolised?

Yeah, WASP was a biggy for me, and so early in our career, it absolutely panicked me! Blackie Lawless is my hero! I didn't meet him exactly but rather passed him in the corridor backstage, I've never been so in awe and yet terrified at the same time, it's a strange feeling. There's NO WAY I would have talked to him though! As much as I love him, he scares me. I think I speak for all of us when I say that meeting Scott Gorham was pretty special. Lizzy are obviously one of our major influences, but he was the loveliest man ever, we chatted for ages about Phil Lynott and loads of other bands. We're really looking forward to going on tour with these guys, couldn't ask for a better bunch of people to do our first UK tour with.

When we last played London; Jody Turner from Rock Goddess came down to see our show in Camden, that was a pretty exciting moment for all of us, she's a massive hero of ours. She was so nice but I can't even remember what I said to her, something daft probably, luckily we didn't know she was in the audience before we played or else we probably wouldn't have gone on stage!

You've come a long way since I first saw you at Hard Rock Hell a few years ago, but you're all very well grounded. What are your hopes for this year?

We just want to get our music out to as many people as possible and to start playing further afield in Europe and beyond! We just want to keep playing live and hope that everyone will keep enjoying what we do. I also hope that one day I will get to meet Steve Harris, if not this year, then at some point in my life!

Photo: Karl-Filip Karlsso

When Sweden's Eclipse released the amazing 'Bleed And Scream' album in 2012 it pushed them to the forefront of the Melodic Rock scene, further enhancing the reputation of front-man Erik Mårtensson as one of the genre's leading lights. His writing, playing and production work seeing the likes of W.E.T., Jimi Jamison, Toby Hitchcock, Adrenaline Rush and Dalton are all recent impressive additions to his C.V. Now in 2015 the release of Eclipse's 'Armageddonize' will further cement that reputation. Erik kindly took time out from his holiday in Tobago to chat to Ant Heeks.

'Bleed And Scream' was such a critically acclaimed album, was there any added pressure when it came to doing the follow-up?

No, not really, I always say the same thing and it's true, we always write for ourselves and we always try to make the kind of record we want to listen to. If we think it's a good song we settle for that and we don't care so much about what anybody wants us to write. We write our own record and if we like it then we release it.

So Frontiers give you the freedom to do what you want?

We have total freedom from Frontiers. They heard the record the first time when it was finished, they didn't hear a demo or anything, so they let us do whatever we want to do and they have full confidence in the band.

Did you have to approach the song-writing process any differently for this album?

We had much less time to write this record, for an Eclipse record it was made real fast, I think we spent about two and a half to three months from writing to the end of the sessions and the mixing. We started writing the record late September/ early October, we had a couple of songs from before but most of the stuff we wrote during that period. There's no time to think, just write and record, and it turned out real good.

Do you just write all the songs that you need for an album or do you have a few left in reserve?

We rarely have any tracks left over, we didn't have any left over from 'Bleed And Scream', maybe some unfinished ideas, but if we don't like the song when we start recording it then we throw it away. We don't finish songs that we don't like. So if we have second thoughts about anything we just throw it away and start working on a new one. It's just a waste of time to finish anything you don't like, when you're making the first demo of the song, if it ain't good as a demo it won't be good on an album. I always know from my gut feeling, if I think it's a good song then I guess somebody else will think it's a good song.

So do you write specifically for the project you're working on, or do you just write songs and then decide which band or artist they would be suitable for?

I always set myself in a writing mode, when I'm writing for Eclipse I write just Eclipse songs and I don't focus on anything else. If it doesn't sound like an Eclipse song then I write something different instead. I rarely write songs and put them in a folder; before this Eclipse album I did an album with the singer from Wig Wam, Ammunition, and when we were writing for that I didn't write Eclipse style songs, I wrote Ammunition style songs. I try to focus on one thing at a time.

As you've mentioned Ammunition, how did you get involved with the project?

Åge (Sten Nilsen) contacted me and wanted to have a meeting in the studio. He wanted me to produce his new solo record - he didn't know whether it was going to be a solo record or a new Wig Wam record at the time - so we started writing stuff but even at the beginning he knew it wasn't going to be a Wig Wam record, so we focused on making it his solo album. We wrote the songs for it and then we kind of found our own style. It's Classic Rock but it's our take on the Classic Rock thing, so it felt more like a band than just a solo record. One thing led to another and it became Ammunition.

So will you be involved in any live shows with Ammunition?

Yes, as much as I can, I'm gonna be playing guitar. It feels really good to just play guitar and not do any lead vocals, it's just having fun and it's great.

Well that leads onto my next question, you are involved with so many different bands and projects, but would you say Eclipse were the band that said the most about you as a writer and performer?

Yeah, Eclipse is closest to my heart, Eclipse music is my music. As I said, we always write the album we wanna have ourselves and Eclipse is our sound. It's me and Magnus (Henriksson), the guitarist, it's our sound, it's what happens when we write songs, it ends up sounding like Eclipse. You always have this one band that gets you and reminds you why you started doing music in the first place and Eclipse is mine. It's my childhood dream of having my own band and we're still having the same band and that's why it's extra important, it's not work for me, it's the reason I'm doing music.

The sound of the band has changed considerably since the first two

albums, why did you decide to go in a different direction?

We see 'Are You Ready To Rock' as the first Eclipse album, that's the first album that we wrote where we didn't think of anything else than what we wanted to hear ourselves. That's where the whole thing of writing for ourselves started. First of all I was really young when we did the first two albums and we had zero budget, I had to mix them myself and I'd never seen a studio in my whole life, so it was just a strange but very learning experience. We had no producer, maybe we had some good ideas but we were in desperate need of a producer but we didn't have one. The first two albums sound like rubbish and the songs are rubbish, we don't really like them. We see them more like official demos, works in progress! (laughs)

You've come a long way since then though!

Yeah, but that's how I learned recording, I had to force myself to learn how to mic guitars and mix and compressors and EQ's and stuff, that's how I learned it, the hard way. We had no budget so we had to do it ourselves. I make my living out of it now so it's really good in that sense.

So music is a full-time job for you?

Yeah, I've been doing it full time for seven or eight years now. I've been doing a lot of live stuff; in the beginning I had to do a lot of covers gigs and stuff, and I still do some, I really enjoy doing that, I love playing live and we still do cover bands. However nowadays it's almost always my own material, be it Eclipse or Ammunition or W.E.T. I'm really happy to be one of the few that can do this full-time, but it's hard work, and you have to work very fast, that's how you make your budgets work.

Onto the new album then, would you say there was a different direction between 'Bleed And Scream' and 'Armageddonize'?

I think 'Armageddonize' is even more melodic and I think it sounds even more Eclipse, on the 'Bleed And Scream' album you can still hear a lot of the influences. The goal we really want to have is that when people hear another band they're gonna say "oh they sound like Eclipse", we want to have a signature sound and I think we made it even more of our signature sound on this one than we did on 'Bleed And Scream'. We just write songs and these are the songs that came out this time. We want to have melodies that are timeless, you can pick out this album in thirty years and even if it sounds dated and old we want people to think that we had really good melodies. If you listen to a really good song from the sixties or even from the fifteenth century, if it has good melodies then it's still a good song and it doesn't matter if it's old. We always want to have melodies to make it memorable and timeless.

So do you have any particular favourites or are you too close to the songs to be subjective?

Yeah, I think I'm too close. It sounds clichéd but I like every song on the album, otherwise it wouldn't be on there. We chose 'Stand On Your Feet' as the first single, I don't know if it's the right choice or not, but we all liked that song and when we wrote it we thought it was kinda special. It's a crazy mix of styles, it doesn't sound so crazy now but when we wrote it we were like "how can this work?" but it worked out. It makes it kinda special. I enjoy the ballad too, 'Live Like I'm Dying', I usually don't like ballads that much and I think I'm a terrible ballad writer, but someone told me a couple of weeks ago that I'm a good ballad writer and I was like "am I?" I usually think I'm a shit ballad writer! (laughs) I always think I suck at it so I try twice as hard when I write a ballad!

What's the story behind the Def Leppard-ish album title?

That is the story behind it, you're spot on! We wanted one of those titles that you can remember that's just one word, like

'Hysteria', you had 'Animalize' from Kiss, we wanted one of those to give a real hint of the eighties because we have one of our feet buried deep in the eighties. It's like a silly name but you can remember it. Our new bass player (Magnus Ulfstedt) came up with the name 'Armageddon' but I thought it was so boring, then I said "what about 'Armageddonize'". We looked it up on the internet but it's just a made-up word so it's unique – if people are going to search on the internet for Eclipse they're gonna find a million hits, but if they search for Eclipse 'Armageddonize' they're gonna find our album. We've got to make it stand out, there are too many "Eclipse" around on Spotify and on the web. It's a really bad name for a band! (laughs)

You and Magnus have been working together for some years now, what is the key to your successful working relationship?

We like the same stuff, we accept the same music, we don't fight over many musical directions at all. We're big fans of AC/DC, that's how it all started, we went to this one year music school many years ago and at music schools there are always music nerds playing Fusion and Jazz and stuff and we were almost the only people playing Hard Rock. That's how we met, he could play AC/DC and he was impressed that I knew all the AC/DC songs as well. And we played them exactly as they should be, most people played them totally wrong! Maybe that was our musical love at first sight! (laughs) He's very easy to work with, we were very different at first, I am very energetic and always have tons of energy and he's a more laid-back person who follows along, but he has so much musicality, he's so good at guitar and he has so many good ideas, we work well together.

You already have a number of shows planned for 2015, is this going to be your biggest tour to date?

Absolutely, it's gonna be our first real, proper tour, we've always just played one gig here and one gig there, maybe a small tour, but this is the first time we will have a bigger run. It's a big thing. I think we have six or seven dates in the U.K. which is probably more than the U.K. actually wants! (laughs)

I have to ask while I have you, is there a possibility of a new W.E.T. album in the near future?

Not at the moment, we're tied up with Eclipse, Robert has Work Of Art, Jeff is starting his new Metal-style career with SOTO. I have no idea what's going to happen. We haven't put the band to death, it's still live, but at the moment we have it in the freezer.

It must be great to be part of the movement that is happening in Sweden and the rest of Scandinavia right now, there are so many great bands.

Yeah, there are a lot of Melodic Rock bands, I don't know the reason why. When we started, although we don't like the first two albums at all, back then if you played Melodic Rock people laughed at you and thought you were an idiot for doing it, but less than ten years ago it all changed and if you say you play Melodic Rock no-one laughs anymore, they respect the music style and it's spilled over so a lot of young musicians play this type of music. They feel confident to start working with it, that's a big difference, and when there's a lot of bands, it gets competitive.

What advice would you give to young bands?

Write good songs. That's the only thing people care about, good songs. Production and musical skills are second to that, if you have good songs people listen, if you have bad songs no-one cares, doesn't matter how good you are playing guitar or singing. Look at The Ramones, they're crappy musicians but they have good songs. It's always about songs, that's the main focus.

I·M·P·E·R·A

Impera, the Hard Rock outfit put together by long-time friends J.K. Impera, Tommy Denander, Matti Alfonzetti and Mats Vassfjord, return with album number three, 'Empire of Sin'. Ian Johnson catches up with JK and talks with him about the heaviness of the new album, the contributions of Matti Alfonzetti and Tommy Denander and whether Impera really is a Supergroup.

The new album has a different sound and style to it than the first two. It's much heavier in places with a Bluesy edge to some of the songs. Why did you decided to toughen up Impera's music?

We decided that we wanted to write an album that was a little bit heavier than what we'd done on the first two and we worked really hard on toughening up our sound. I think that in the end we did a really great job and the album, it really works and it's one we're all very proud of.

The new songs also have a lot of different styles running through them; there's the Eastern flavoured 'Hole In The Sky', the Metal edged 'The Beast Is Dead' and the Bluesy 'End Of The World'. Why so many styles on one album?

To tell you the truth, that's the kind of music I love to listen to myself. I love all different kinds of Rock music and music in general and that's why the new songs sound the way they do. I've listened to lots of different music over the years and it's influenced me, so in a nutshell that's why you get this melting pot of musical ideas on the new album.

So is it just you who writes the music or is it a band collaboration?

The music is actually written by Tommy and myself. I also write all the lyrics. Then I send the songs to Matti and he adds in the vocal melodies and harmonies and he makes those things fit with the songs. On the whole though, it's always been me and Tommy who writes the music. So maybe this time we both wanted to put a different spin on things and that's why the songs sound like they do.

Talking of Tommy, who's very well known to our readers, he usually has what I can only describe as a very memorable guitar sound. When you hear it on an album you immediately know it's him. On 'Empire Of Sin' you'd be hard pushed, I think, to tell it's him straight away. His guitar has been beefed up and it is certainly more aggressive than a lot of his other work.

What happened, and I'm glad you noticed this, is that we'd talked about making the songs and the album a little bit heavier than what we'd done before, so Tommy just played the guitar the way the songs demanded him to play. As you said the aggression came out in his playing and what he did really suited the new songs. He's such a versatile and talented guy that he can just switch from AOR to Metal without even thinking about it. He's such a gifted musician and a joy to work with.

On the new album you have Europe's John Leven co-writing and playing on the song 'Thunder In Your Heart'. How did this come about?

Actually John and I are old, old friends. So when I was writing the new songs for the album I called him up and asked if he wanted to write a song with me. John's a great guy and he was excited to work with us. What is also great is that John actually plays the guitar and does the solo on the song and that's the first time he's ever been recorded playing lead guitar on an album. Hopefully he'll work with us on the next album by helping us to write some new stuff. Interestingly we also tried to get Vinnie Vincent (ex-KISS) to play on the new album. We tracked him down and asked to play on one of the songs but unfortunately, due to time and everything, he couldn't do it but on the next one definitely.

I suppose since day one you've been tagged as a bit of a Supergroup. Has this aided or hindered the band?

I've read that myself in magazines and on the net but I don't think we're a Supergroup. We are just a bunch of friends; friends who I've known for years, who get together to write and play music. If people want to label us, fine. We don't mind really what people call us, though Supergroup does sound good (laughs), doesn't it, and it hasn't hurt us but we're just musicians who love playing Rock music.

We've talked about Tommy but I have to say that on the new album it's Matti Alfonzetti who is for me the star of the show. He hasn't sounded this good since his work with the Bam Bam Boys.

You know, I agree. He's singing better now than he ever did in my opinion and for me it's the songs on this album that has brought this out of him. If you just listen to one song off the new album, 'End Of The World', you'll know what we're talking about. I think that his performance on that song is the best vocal he's ever done. He's unbelievable and I think he's getting better as a singer with each passing year.

You're all very busy as working musicians and producers. So is it hard for you to sync up your work schedules?

The answer is yes, it's very tough to get together. We all have other things we're busy with and getting a few weeks together to play a few dates is hard for us. That's why the album took a while to record because we had to use four different studios. Yet I knew that it was going to be like this from the day Impera began and that we'd have a hard time touring. So that's why we haven't done a proper tour together, not yet anyway. We've done the odd date of course but we'd love to tour properly as a band. We'd love to come over to Europe and play there and especially the UK because I get lots of mail from fans from England who ask us when we're coming over. We recently tried to get on the Europe tour but that didn't work out - we're working hard to come over there and tour. One day I hope.

What does the future hold for Impera then, Johan?

Well I'm already in the studio working on Impera album number four because I have to keep busy. I'm also writing for other artists and I'm thinking in a roundabout way of maybe doing a solo album. I have a lot of great musician friends who I'd love to work with on that, great singers and guitarists who I might give a call and ask if they'd want to do something like that with me. Would be interesting wouldn't it? So the future is all about working hard and making music that I hope the fans will love.

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caroline

Devil's Train exploded onto the scene in 2012 with their self titled debut album. Made up of members of Mystic Prophecy, Stratovarius, Evergrey and Masterplan, the musicians shared a common vision to make a Classic Rock album to complement their usual Power Metal output. They succeeded spectacularly and with their follow up 'II' out now, James Gaden talked to vocalist R.D. Liapakis to hear all about it.

Let's backtrack a little - when I reviewed the first album I had no prior knowledge of who the members of the band were, or how you got together.

I was playing with Mystic Prophecy in 2010 and we were touring with Stratovarius around Europe. I had an idea about forming a band for more Classic Rock n' Roll, rather than more Power Metal stuff. I came across a guitarist from Greece, a guy called Lakis Ragasas. I was really surprised to find a guy from Greece who could play guitar so well for this kind of music. We started throwing around ideas and we realised we had a common dream of how this music should be. We were working on songs while I was touring with Prophecy and I put the ideas to Jörg Michael, who was playing drums with Stratovarius. He liked them and we just laid down the songs and worked on them together. By the summer of 2010 we started recording and we realised the energy from the songs was so great, it wasn't something that should be limited to a project, this was the birth of a new band. Jörg suggested the former Stratovarius bass player Jari Kainulainen and we had our band!

The new album is a great follow up to the extremely strong debut. I think this one is a bit more Blues influenced, and has a heavier vibe. Do you agree with that?

Absolutely! This time we wanted to go a lot deeper into what we always thought was the roots, the Bluesy essence of the music, the way you handle the melodies. It's what we wanted to do from the beginning and the second album gives us a chance to do that, while keeping things heavy.

Do you get chance to write songs together as a band or are you restricted to working remotely?

Actually Lakis and I managed to work on all the songs together for this record. For the first album I was working mostly by myself but Lakis and I did just about everything together this time around. We expect the other guys to come in and do what they do best, play and perform in their own style to give it our sound.

I really enjoyed 'Mr Jones', can you tell me about that track?

That one is about the devil. It's the story of the young guy who goes to the crossroads wanting to learn to play guitar and a big black car approaches. The devil is inside and the guy signs a contract to be really successful in his life, be a famous Rock star, have everything he wants but he has to trade his soul for it. The devil tricks him and he doesn't get any of it but still pays with his soul. It's a popular story and a simple idea. 'Mr Jones' is our telling of it, with a Bluesy kind of sound.

I also loved the video for the single 'Hollywood Girl', I loved how it was quite an old school video in its approach.

We thought that kind of song, with that sound, was kind of retro, almost eighties in style, which was going back to the roots of the music, focusing on the melodies and combining it with a heavy sound. Everything was done with a purpose and the video was no different. We had fun!

On the first album you did a terrific cover of 'American Woman', and this time around you include two classics: 'Born To Be Wild' and 'Immigrant Song'. I think both of these sound like Devil's Train songs, rather than covers.

Thank you, we wanted to achieve that. We have a certain style the way we do things and once you understand how the original song works, whether it's Steppenwolf, Led Zeppelin or whoever, you can focus on the elements and put your own take on the whole thing.

How do you choose which songs to cover?

We were just jamming in the studio, rehearsing together and we'd just choose four or five songs we all liked. We did 'Burn' and 'Hush' by Deep Purple, tried a couple of others and we decided 'Immigrant Song' and 'Born To Be Wild' worked the best. We tried them in concert also and people liked them. We decided to record them for the album, no rehearsing, just play them in the studio and the whole thing was so spontaneous and nice.

Have you had much opportunity to play live?

Yes, we didn't have many shows in 2014 but we have toured Spain and played some festivals; we appeared at Vasby in Sweden alongside bands like Europe and Gotthard and we played a couple of shows in Switzerland too. We hope to hit the road again soon. We've got a good response on social media from people in the UK who want to see us, so we'd like to make that happen if we can.

You handled the production for the new album yourself. Is that something you enjoy doing, or a necessity to keep the costs down?

That's exactly it. We worked together on the drums, recording those first, then do some parts at home - bass parts for example are easy to record at home with the computers around nowadays. We did it in the same studio as the first album and it was mixed in Sweden by Frederik Nordstrom. It's really nice to see as we lay the tracks down, there's drums, bass, rhythm guitar and then really only a solo and a voice on top. Really simple arrangements, very raw and direct.

I think 'II' is a worthy follow up to a great debut album, I hope it takes off and we see you on tour and preparing for album number three soon!

Thank you so much, we really put a lot of effort into this album and there was a lot of dedication to the record. This album has as much love as it does energy!

THE ANSWER

The Answer look set to 'Raise A Little Hell' in 2015 with studio album number five about to be unleashed and significant road action to follow. Michael Anthony wanted to know more and had the questions. Vocalist Cormac Neeson had... er... the answers.

I was struck by the variety on the album and think it could be your most accessible and consistent album yet.

I think we always bring variety to our song writing. That's partly because we'd get really bored just making the same record time after time. But also, when you get four guys in a band who all like to play a very active role in the writing process, different people push and pull to different degrees on different songs. If Paul [*Mahon, guitarist*] steps into the studio with a riff and a chorus, the chances are he's going to want to guide that song to its conclusion. Similarly, if I arrive out there with a page of lyrics, well thought out melodies and a basic chord progression, then I'm going to be the guiding force on that one. The four of us are actually quite different when it comes to our musical tastes but we always find common ground when it comes to the stuff we write and play. We are very excited and keen to get on the road and take our new music to the people. So far the new material is really giving our older stuff a run for its money, which is a good sign. As far as the consistency of the record goes, maybe we're finally getting good at this!

Are there any tracks that particularly excite you?

All of them! And I mean that. I'd mortgage my house on any one of the twelve tracks on there. The Answer don't put music out there if we're not a hundred percent confident that it should be heard and played live. There are a few surprises on there like 'Strange Kinda Nothing' and 'Cigarettes And Regret', which are a little different to anything we've put out before. It's always fun and rather nerve-wracking to see how our fans take to the fresh twists to our sound.

Has anyone else mentioned that 'Strange Kinda Nothing' sounds a bit like a Tony Clarkin (Magnum) song?

You know, you're the second person in as many days to make that comparison, which is really weird as I have never listened to a full Magnum album in my life. Maybe one of the other guys is a closet fan and has been secretly trying to sneak Tony Clarkin references into our songs! I love the track myself and it brings a flavour to the record that really complements the Rock and electric Blues that encase it.

It's been a while since you hit the Rock mainstream with the rather fine 'Rise' album. Many, myself included, are surprised that you're not playing big arenas yet. Why has it been so difficult to maintain momentum?

That's the million dollar question. Not just for us but for a bunch of bands that should be making some proper noise at the business end of the live scene. It's not due to any lack of ambition or work ethic, I can tell you that. It's also a question we tend not to dwell on for too long. All we can do is continue to make high quality music, and keep working hard and touring harder. We're lucky to still be in the game and still in with a chance. We also love doing what we do, which is the most important variable of all. I could get into a deep conversation at this point about how one measures success but we'll save that one for a night on the tour bus over a bottle of whisky.

The AC/DC 'Black Ice' tour gave you a lot of exposure. What's the most important thing you learnt from that?

That to succeed at that level for that long you need a deep visceral passion for what you do. So many young pretenders have fallen by the wayside but AC/DC, after all these years, were still able to sell it to me every night – and I watched all 119 shows from the sound desk. I think Brian Johnson did that whole tour on pure adrenalin. The buzz he got from playing brilliant Rock And Roll music in front of thousands of people. It was inspiring.

The change of record labels seems to have galvanised you. Are you comfortable now with the set up around you?

We just signed for another two records after this one. To have a stable platform to get on with the task at hand helps a lot. The label came to us as fans of the band with a vision for the future and so far they have lived up to their promises, which is rare for any record label. When the AC/DC tour ended we signed to a major label and that didn't really work out. We got a little lost in the machine. The team we have around us now are just a good fit and it feels like we've got our mojo working again for sure.

You'll be touring in support of the album?

You'd better believe it! Our live show is such an important part of our identity that a busy touring schedule is more or less a constant in our band. The 'Raise A Little Hell Tour' kicks off in Belfast in March and that leg takes us around the UK. We then head to Europe in April and on to America in May. Then it's back over this side of the pond for a bunch of Summer festivals, including Wacken in Germany, Hellfest in France, Nova Rock in Austria and Greenfields in Switzerland. It's going to be a busy year but that's so great. I can't wait to get out there again.

What do you think this album and tour will do for The Answer?

I'd like to think our fans will embrace this record and that we'll make some new friends. We're looking forward to getting back to the States to see whether anyone still remembers our name over there. I get butterflies when I think about what lies ahead – the miles we're going to cover, the crowds we're going to play for. But I'm quietly confident that we can make some headway off the back of a record of which we're very proud. A little electric Blues for the masses never hurt anyone. So who knows? 2015 could be the year of The Answer.

LONELY ROBOT

Sue Ashcroft interviews John Mitchell. Photo by Rebecca Needs-Menear.

What can I tell you about John Mitchell? Well, he's a singer, guitarist, producer and one of the most talented men I've ever met. Many people know him from bands such as It Bites and Frost, but I've known John several years now and he's often talked about doing a solo album. He's finally bringing out what is not solo album as such, but a fabulous collaboration with some of the most talented musicians, under the title Lonely Robot. To understand the concept, I chatted to John about how he came up with the idea....*

You've finished your album, but it's been quite a long time in the process, hasn't it?

Not really. I remember having a conversation with Thomas (Waber) from InsideOut in a Chinese restaurant in about March and he said "What's going on?" and I said "I want to do something without having to rely on anyone else" and he said "You mean like a solo album?" and we decided to position it halfway between a solo album and a band album with a lot of guests, rather than it being me and a set band. He said I should give it a title so it didn't look so much like a solo album. I have a lot of old notebooks and I remember waking up at 3am and scribbling some nonsense down in one of these about a robot and I thought right, well that'll be the starting point then. I never write a song unless I've got a title for it. My absolute pet hate is when people turn up at the studio and say "Well, this song should be called 'Cock and Balls'!" and I say "Is that *really* what it's going to be called?" and they say "Well, it's a 'working title'..." and they haven't even written the lyrics or know what it's about... so why are they in my studio? Anyway, everyone has their own way of doing things, but for me, the most important thing is the top line and what the song is about. There are a lot of people out there who think "We'll sling some chords together, then at the last minute, as an afterthought, we'll scribble some nonsense down and give it a working title and at the *very* last minute, we'll give the song a name!" I hate that, because you just don't know where you stand. You wouldn't make a cake like that, would you? You'd say "Right, I'm going to make a Black Forest Gateau" and off you'd go. You wouldn't be like "I don't know what this cake's going to be, but it's certainly got lots of cake stuff in it... wait a minute, I'm going to cover it in pink icing!" It's not a very good analogy, but you get what I mean. I need a title to begin with and, if I can't think of one straight away, I've got loads of old books and stuff and I flick through them and think right, that's an interesting song title. I don't know, it's like a coat hook – you've got to have something to hang the whole thing off.

So, from getting the title for the project, did that then spawn all the songs?

Well, kind of. The title 'Lonely Robot' is actually a lyric in a song by Sting's daughter called 'Self Machine'. It reminded me of the film *Wall-E* and I love that film. I found all these words about something being left behind and that became the title track. The first song I wrote on the album was 'Why Do We Stay?' I always wanted to do a duet as I've never done one before. I like Heather Findlay's voice and she doesn't sound like Kate Bush, but she has a breathiness about her voice like Kate Bush does when she sings softly, which I absolutely love. So, I said to her "I've got this song – it's amazing, you'll love it!" but I didn't have a song at all so, she booked a train to come down and by the time she got here I had the finished recorded demo basic structure of the song! The lyric 'please come home' appears quite a few times throughout the album, and in that song particularly – it's about two people who don't get along, repeating the question 'why do we stay?' with all sorts of flowery metaphors thrown in. When she arrived she loved it and she said "Wow, it must've taken you ages to write" and I was like "Yeah... ages..." and then she put her vocals down and chatted a bit, and then she went off to a yoga retreat! Anyway, I sent the song to the label and they loved it, so that got the ball rolling. I always like to start with a ballad. On the It Bites 'Tall Ships' album I started with 'For Safe Keeping' – get the soft shite out of the way first! So, there you go. Before I had any idea of what the album was going to sound like I had eleven titles. I liked all the titles – I love words. If you've got a strong title, you've far more chance of coming up with a decent song.

The thing is, almost every song title on the album has that solitude about it. It's a very emotional album. I cried the first time I listened to it all the way through.

That's very sweet of you – I thought you were going to think "What the fuck is this nonsense? This doesn't sound like It Bites!"

How did you choose who was going to guest on your album?

Basically, it's the people I know! Ha, ha! Well, Steve Hogarth – I love his piano playing. He's got an unusual way of playing the piano. The way he plays with his left hand – how he puts the emphasis on the beat, it's very unusual. If I play, it's a bit like a lounge singer, but he puts his own spin on things and there's stuff that he thought of that I didn't. When he was down – I hate to say this, but I didn't even think of asking him to sing! So, after he did the piano parts, he said "while I'm here, why don't I pop down a backing vocal – you don't have to use it but, you know?" so I quickly set up a microphone, he sang a few ideas he'd had and they ended up on the track.

And then of course there's our Peter Cox [*of Go West*]! I was there that day you met him for the first time and he said to you "Oh my God – John Mitchell! I've been a fan of yours for years – I'd love to work with you!"

Yes! At Rewind a couple of years ago – I'd forgotten that. Well, I went up to speak to him later and he was lovely. We've been friends ever since that really, and the strange thing about Peter is that he loves guitars. He's not interested in singers, he just loves guitars and guitarists. Not a week goes by but I don't get sent a bunch of Youtube links to guitarists and he's like "What do you think of this guy?" It's funny because I'm the opposite - I can't stand guitar players! I'm far more interested in singers and singing. But yes, he's a lovely guy and very, very humble. Very self deprecatory which I can't get my head around as, for me, he was the voice of the '80s.

Now – next person I want to talk about on your album is the actor Lee Ingleby! That's a weird one. How did that come about?

Now that's easy! Lee Ingleby is my favourite actor. I think it's criminal that he's not more well known. I mean, people know him to see from *George Gently* or *Harry Potter* or whatever, but he's such a lovely guy. He's very underrated, but he's told me a few things that are coming up, so I don't think he'll be that way for long. But it was a bit in *Master and Commander* that got me hooked. We've been friends for quite some time and there aren't many people I 'geek out' about, but I'm definitely a fan boy when I'm around him. I wanted someone who was very English to do the voice over and he definitely is. He's very northern. I got him down to the studio and got him to read some stuff and, while some of it's a bit processed now, you can still hear him. In 'God Versus Man' he plays the voice of a newsreader and there are a few other tracks he's on and you can make out what he's saying if you listen closely, but that was kind of the point – I didn't want it to be too obvious.

You recently went and walked around London in a space suit. What made you decide to do that?

As soon as I'd written the songs I knew what the album cover was going to be because I'd bought this old robot from a junk store. It looked like Robbie the Robot and that was the idea – he gets left behind, Wall-E gets left behind and the album isn't really about robots getting left behind, it's about people

feeling like they're alone, going through the same rigmarole like robots do every day – it's not as literal as it seems. Anyway, I knew right away that I wanted the cover to be an astronaut with an outstretched hand, holding the robot. I was thinking about that film 'A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court' – a man out of time kind of thing and I thought what would freak people out? I know, a man in a space suit wandering around London. And, let me point out, I was the first person ever to do it. There have been a few people seen doing it since, but I was the first.

How weird! So, how did it feel to you when you had the helmet on – the feeling of solitude that nobody knew who you were?

Absolutely, it really took a lot for me to do it, it was terrifying. I was shaking the whole day. My friend Rebecca and I were just running around trying to get shots, not staying too long in one place because we didn't want to draw too much attention to ourselves, but she was coming up with all these places we should go. Then, we got into this thing where, it's the law if you get a shot which has less than five people you need permission, but if it's *more* than five people, it's considered a crowd and you don't. So, there were a couple of photos where we had to Photoshop my head on them to stop us having to get permission, but that was kind of my idea anyway. I thought if we can't have these people in the photos, then why not make it completely narcissistic and put my head on their bodies and make it look like there's more than one of me in the shot. Actually, nobody came up and tapped me on the shoulder or spoke to me – just a couple of Japanese tourists who wanted their photograph taken with me and we got moved on in Trafalgar Square because there are some parts where you're not allowed to shoot pictures, but it was completely terrifying. I mean, I could've paid my mate £50 to do it, but then I thought no, that takes away from the experience.

And again, that's showing the solitude – the fact that people are looking at you, but nobody wants to approach you.

The thing is, I hate to sound like a cliché, but I never fitted in at school, I was always into different things than everyone else, went through bullying, etc. so I suppose this is a depiction of all those sorts of feelings. But going back to the album, it came full circle, because when I was a kid, I bought a little scrambler bike for £50 from one of the free papers and I used to ride around on it with my Sony Walkman on and I remember the only song I liked that year was 'We Close Our Eyes' by Go West! I copied it about ten times all on one side of a C60 tape and I remember just riding around woodland on the scrambler listening to that on repeat. I told Peter that and he loved that story. Same with Steve Hogarth – when I did my art degree and was doing my final installation, I had Marillion 'Seasons End' on the whole time.

What's happening with all the other bands you're in? Every time I speak to you, you're always doing at least another five or six bands at the same time.

Well, you can spread yourself too thinly sometimes, can't you? One of the reasons I wanted to do this was because it was a new thing, it was my name on the contract and it was completely my thing. I'm not saying that I'm not destined to do any of those things again, but I just don't want to be putting in so much work and not getting the 'fiscal outcome' I think I should get. And that might make me sound like a control freak and, in a way I suppose I am, but I've definitely had more fun doing this album than I have on any of the other things. I could get up at 7am and go downstairs and start recording or say "I don't feel like doing it today". I wasn't waiting around for anyone else. I'm not opposed to doing another It Bites record, just not right now. We did record four or five songs, but it seemed a bit directionless to me, so now John Beck's gone off to be in Fish's band for the foreseeable future, so that's that. It kind of threw things into perspective for me. Don't get me wrong, I've had some of the best times of my life on stage playing It Bites songs, but sometimes musically, it can be quite stilting. To be able to get up in the morning and record what you like, sing what you like, I mean, it's a pressure, but it's an enjoyable pressure and something I've never done before. Also, it doesn't come with the comparisons of "You're not as good as Francis Dunnery..." or whatever. The comparisons have ended for the time being, and it's nice. At least I can say I did it on my own terms.

CHINA SKY

China Sky, the legendary 80s Melodic Hard Rock act who released their highly regarded, cult self-titled album some twenty-five years ago, return with a brand new CD on Escape Records, simply called 'II'. Ian Johnson speaks with the band's singer Ron Perry about what happened to them in the 80s, why they've returned and what's to come for the band in the future.

I'd like to start with a question that goes back to 1988, China Sky at that time seemed to have everything a Melodic Hard Rock band needed: rave album reviews, US radio airplay, the image and above all else, the songs. So what went wrong, because I believe that only six weeks after the album came out China Sky folded as a working band?

Actually what happened was a whole series of events that eventually led to our breaking up. Firstly Bobby Ingram, our guitarist, was asked to join Molly Hatchet on their tour as a replacement for their guitar player who was unavailable. When those dates finished Bobby just didn't come back, which then led to the record company being a little shaky with us. They tried to get us on a couple of tours but they weren't happy that Bobby wasn't in the band anymore. The tour offers quickly dried up and then because of that they didn't really bother to try to promote the album anymore, which stopped us in our tracks really. So we decided to bail out of the China Sky thing and said we'll try something else instead, maybe a new band or whatever else comes our way, but at that moment back in '88, China Sky was dead.

So why now, almost twenty-five years later, do you get together again and make a new China Sky album?

Well you can blame the fans and internet for that. A few years back now I started to get emails from people asking whether I had copies of the China Sky album or did I know where you could get hold of a copy, or could I sign something for them. These requests were coming from all over the world, Japan, the US and especially from all over Europe. I just thought, "Wow!" I never expected anyone would still want to hear our music all those years later. Then Escape Records contacted me a couple of years back and asked if the band had the rights to the first album, which sadly we didn't, but they then said that if we ever wanted to do something in the future, they would be very interested in helping us, which was nice to hear. Sadly though I sat on their offer and the idea of doing something new for about two years, but as the mails kept on coming I suddenly started to think of doing a new China Sky album and that's when things started to happen. I talked with my old friend and original CS bass player Richard Smith about doing something and he said he had a few songs that we could work on and I had a few myself. So we went into the studio and worked on them and they worked so well that we decided to go full blast with the new album, which has been great. Escape especially have been wonderful to work with and we're so happy with the new album because we didn't like the way the band ended in '88. Hopefully this new start can set the record straight for us.

Talking of the songs, are they leftovers from the first China Sky album or are they all newly written for this album? On the first album you had a couple of outside writers involved in the song writing, Frank Wildhorn and Bob Marlette. So is there an outside writing influence this time or are the songs all in house?

Firstly, they are all brand new. There were some songs leftover from the first album sessions which we listened to, to see if we could make something out of them but then we felt that no, we want to make a new start, no old material, so all the songs are new ones. The reason Frank and Bob were on the first album was that the record company wanted us to write in a certain way, which is what they were there for really, to guide us. The new songs though have all been written by us with nobody else's help. Actually that helps us because this time we weren't limited to what the record company back then thought we should sound like. This time we wrote what we wanted to write, everything coming from the heart.

When you finally decided to get China Sky back together was there ever a discussion as to whether you should ask Bobby Ingram to participate?

No, not really. When Bobby decided back in '88 to stay with Molly Hatchet, that was the thing that broke the band up. So when we decided to get back together we knew Bobby would be too busy with Hatchet to work with us, so no, we never really thought of asking him back but we do wish him well.

So who is in the band?

Well there's me and Richard, our new guitarist is Steve Wheeler who has been a member of the Danny Joe Brown Band and Hatchet. He's a hell of a player, a gun for hire who is well respected in the music industry and he's a local guy from where we're based in Jacksonville, Florida. Then we have Tim McGowan on keyboards, who's from Scotland originally. He's a wonderful musician who understands just what the keyboards mean to the music of China Sky and we love that he's in the band. Finally we have on drums the legendary Bruce Crump who has played with Molly Hatchet, Streetheart and Gator Country to name a few and he's just amazing to work with.

The first album was produced by Karl Richardson, who worked with the Bee Gees, but the new album has been handled by yourself. Did you ever contemplate getting in an outside producer?

The appeal for me to get the band back together was in part so I could produce the album myself. You see, for the last twenty years and more that's really what I've been doing. Producing other people's music and working on TV and radio commercials, film soundtracks, things like that. So the production side of things was a really exciting thing for me, not just making the album. I think I did a good job and I think the new CD turned out really well but also getting to do the video for 'One Life' was another wonderful thing for me as well.

Well let's get on to that video Ron. What can you tell us about it?

The concept of the film starts with me sitting home watching an old video of ourselves on the TV, then I get up leave the house and walk through various cities telling what is essentially our story, through the lyrics. And because I'm a working musician I can't afford a car (laughs) so I walk the whole way. The video starts in Detroit which is my home town. Although I was born in Jacksonville I was brought up in Detroit, so that place is very special to me. Interestingly the house I actually walk out of in the video is the one I grew up in. The other parts of the video were filmed over the summer, wherever I was working in the United States at the time. Finally when I enter the studio to join the band at the end of the video we're in Hollywood, so it's a metaphor in a way for the band's twenty-five year long journey.

There's also a short documentary video on your website about how the band got back together. Will you be doing more updates like this?

Yeah, I hope so. From time to time and when possible we'll do a video blog kind of thing to keep the fans updated on touring and what we're all doing. Hopefully if things go well with the new album, maybe one day we'll get to do a live concert DVD.

Talking of touring, did you ever get to tour back in '88 and what are your plans for touring now?

No, we never got to play a full tour. We did the odd date here and there but no tour. This time we're hoping to get out and tour but as you probably know the tour support for this kind of music is nowhere near as big as it was back then but we hope to play here in the US and hopefully over in Europe sometime, maybe at a festival. Sadly however, because we sat on the idea of doing a new album for a couple of years, we've missed the chance to play at Firefest and I'm kicking myself because of that. Every musician who's played there says what a fantastic thing it was to do; hopefully though we'll get over sometime in the summer for the festivals.

Finally I hope we don't have to wait another twenty-five years for a new album!

Ha ha, no, I hope not either. Back in the 80s it was outside forces that stopped us in our tracks - record company execs pulling strings and not helping us. This time Escape have been great and just let us do our thing, so if this new album goes well we hope to continue making records for years to come. It's all down to the fans that we're back, so a big thank you to them.

LONELY ROBOT

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Rock 'n' Roll Rebels & The Sunset Strip

Guns n' Roses, Poison, Faster Pussycat, Warrant, Bang Tango, Kix, Lizzy Borden, Love/Hate… So much of the music we love emanated from Hollywood, and more specifically the hive of debauchery and Rock n' Roll we called The Sunset Strip. Known for releasing albums by Melodic Rock bands who never received the breaks their music deserved, US label Eonian Records have decided to celebrate this scene in the only way they know how. Hence with 36 unsigned bands and 72 unreleased songs, the four CD box set, 'Rock n' Roll Rebels And The Sunset Strip' looks set to be the final word of The Strip scene…until Volume Two that is…

Taking us on a trip down memory Strip are three musicians who have songs featuring prominently on 'Rock n' Roll Rebels…', Taz guitarist Ethan Gladstone, Rattlesnake Shake vocalist Jimmy Thrill and The Wild and Johnny And The Jaguars vocalist JohnnyX who also co-produced the box-set. Your tour guide is Firework's Steven Reid…

"Many poke fun at the scene," Ethan begins. "I get it, but you know it was huge and part of the history of music in Los Angeles. I'm proud to have been part of it and this compilation. I don't think anybody to date has pulled together so many of the bands in one release." Something Jimmy Thrill is also keen to point out. "Steven Craig from Eonian is a big fan of the music that came from the Sunset Strip in the 1980s, where no one will ever know what it was like unless you were there…it was nothing like 'Rock Of Ages'!"

So what was it like? Thrill takes up the gauntlet.

"Everything that you suspect might have happened did. It was totally decadent, hedonistic, reckless and fun as hell!"

JohnnyX of The Wild

JohnnyX gives a hearty laugh…

"Yeah baby, like a kid in the candy store! Actresses, models, strippers, mud wrestlers, call girls and investors with boatloads of cash. Weekend after-show parties in the Hollywood Hills, Beverly Hills or Malibu. Music, partying and jamming all night. Hell-raising times…Tons of cocaine or your drug of choice. Damn crazy life. I wouldn't change a thing though. It is what it was. The Sunset Strip in the late 80s."

"I grew up on the Strip and still live there today," Jimmy adds. "I remember when Slash lost his first top hat and we ended up walking around The Strip one night begging people to give us money so he could buy a new one. He felt naked without it! Remember no one knew who Slash was at that time, he was just a drunk that kept passing out in the gutters. People would just step over him and keep passing out their band flyers. But it was one big happy family, Faster Pussycat, Bang Tango, we played with Steve Jones from The Sex Pistols, White Zombie, Johnny Thunders and Andy McCoy and Sami Yaffa from Hanoi Rocks. Axl and Izzy would come to our shows and support us."

"It's amazing how powerful the Sunset Strip really was," Johnny continues. "Fans were coming from across the world to imbibe in the music and insane partying. It was truly enthralling. The Sunset Strip was packed with promoters, fanzines and bands flyering, starting from The Whiskey A Go Go all the way down to The Troubadour. There were lines around the block to get into the Cathouse or the Coconut Teaszer. Rock n' Roll was at its fullest form of debaucherousness. The Sunset Strip today is now only a sad parody of what it once was. Bill Gazzarri was called the Godfather for a reason. He had been protecting the Strip and up till his death in 1990 Bill was an icon and a superb human being. This was the beginning of the end. After his death the West Hollywood Sheriffs came in on horseback and put a stop to our fun and madness…that was brutal."

"Then it got dark," Ethan remembers. "Too much drugs, too many egos, too many close calls with success that ultimately led to disappointment." Something Jimmy Thrill expands upon. "Our attitudes needed to be adjusted. We pissed off a lot of business people back then who had shown interest in us. You have to remember we were kids back then and we were more Punk Rock than the Hair Metal people now perceive. Our heroes were The Ramones and New York Dolls, the real stuff that didn't equate to money or fame. Just to be around or accepted by the LA music scene was enough to think you made it. MCA wanted to sign us and Al Teller, the president, sent his A&R guy down to hang-out with us. All we did was put him down and the band he just signed called Pretty Boy Floyd, which happened to be the band they were just about to put tons of money into. We didn't give a shit about making money, it was more about getting girls to our show which brought out the dudes which gave us a large following!"

"Then the final blow," Ethan states sadly, "....Nirvana. It was pretty quick; we were on our last legs by then anyway, Grunge was just what broke the camel's back."…

Yes, the 'G Word', someone had to go there, but surprisingly our three Sunset heroes don't all agree on its impact.

"It's not quite what everybody's perception has become." Johnny contradicts. "Most of the bands in Hollywood knew there was change in musicality and performance. The change had been coming and most of us were already moving to variant forms of Rock n' Roll. That is kinda what 'Rock n' Roll Rebels and The Sunset Strip' is all about; telling the truth of our times through our music, words and photos. Certainly musical art in Hollywood was heavily evolving through 1985 to 1991. A lot of those bands from Seattle had been hanging out on the scene in Hollywood already. They were coming to see our shows at Gazzarri's or some of the 'Hollywood Underground' clubs. The Wild had members from Alice In Chains and Pearl Jam pop into the studio while we were recording and the cats from Mother Love Bone came to a couple of The Wild after-show parties. There was no type of animosity whatsoever between Hollywood and Seattle at that time." And amazingly Jimmy agrees. "Nirvana were fans of The Strip too, they just wouldn't admit to it. It was the anti pretty-boy look but believe me, early on Kurt Cobain looked like all of us. Andrew Wood of Mother Love Bone could have of been any singer on The Strip during the late 80s. Every band had a ballad in their set until 'Smells Like Teen Spirit' came out and made it uncool."

So all this Grunge hated the Sunset Strip is media myth, with no foundation? Just like Johnny Rotten "hated Prog" while actually loving a bit of Pink Floyd? It's a topic JohnnyX has a lot to share on.

"Lord Have Mercy! That is certainly opening a gigantic can o' worms. But the truth must be told. Yes, there were band members from the pre-Grunge scene hanging out in Hollywood during the late 80s thru 1991. I have spoken to other band members (on 'Rock n Roll Rebels') about this 'insane backward media phenomenon thing'. It's kinda crazy and certainly insulting to all of us performing then on the Sunset Strip and in the Hollywood Underground scene. Of course, there were great Glam and Metal bands kicking ass on the scene and packing the clubs full tilt but there was also the onset of a type of pre-Industrial, Blues based Rock and even groups combining Hip Hop and Jazz. It was not what the entertainment media has dubbed "our" Hollywood. This is one of the prime reasons Eonian Records and I have produced this CD, to give a glimpse into Hollywood as it really was 25 years ago. To begin to put an end to the 'media myth' that the Sunset Strip was just a bunch of poodle heads with no talent. There were some great players and bands at that time. Keep in mind that the songs on this

Taz with guitarist Ethan Gladstone (far right)

CD are mainly demo tapes made for industry people. We didn't have fifty thousand bucks, or more, to record in the studio. Hollywood and its music has always been evolving from the Doors and Van Halen, to Motley Crue, Gn'R and Warrant, this CD is what I would call the 3rd era of the Hollywood music scene."

So if Grunge didn't kill the Rock scene on The Strip, what did? Johnny again has an interesting take you might not expect…

"It was financial. I was managed during the late 80s by a man named Kenny Ostin (RIP), who was the son of the owner of Warner Bros. Records. He gave me the lowdown. First, there were these cats from the Seattle area that were creating their own type of cool, unpretentious Rock n' Roll and they were damn good songwriters. A new change of scenery would be good for the industry. Second, and probably more important, a lot of Hollywood bands had already been very successful; Quiet Riot, Motley Crue, Guns n' Roses... Since there was now so much money involved in big bands, the managers, lawyers and so on had a strong idea of just how big signing bonuses and how many points (cash returns) should be going to the bands, producers and the attorneys themselves. Hollywood Rock n' Roll had become quite the commodity. I think Kenny Ostin told me it took a million dollars to break a new band. To put it succinctly, Hollywood bands started to price themselves out of the market. That's the basics of it. Of course there were many other underlying factors, but it really came down to this. There was a new burgeoning music scene in the northwest USA, that could be profitable, and the big drawing bands in Hollywood were demanding too much money. Business was business. It had nothing to do with talent."

But let's get back to the set Eonian have put together. Which bands do the trio think people will really get a kick from? Johnny simply can't decide.

"Damn, now that's a loaded question!!! Most of these bands are good friends of mine and were good enough to donate their songs and old demo tapes for 'Rock n' Roll Rebels'. Eonian Records is giving all of the CDs' net proceeds to a very worthy benefit. So I will let the fans hear the music, read the bio's and pics and judge for themselves." Whereas Jimmy Thrill is happy to give JohnnyX's band a mention. "The Wild, Blackboard Jungle and Hardly Dangerous; I still keep in touch with those guys and girls...we are all still rockin' out there with our original line-ups still intact!" While Ethan adds "The Mimes and Jimmy's band, Rattlesnake Shake, who were another two killer acts" to that list.

Let's leave the final thoughts on what is sure to be one of the key 2015 releases in the world of Melodic Hard Rock to the ever insightful JohnnyX.

"I have not really been surprised about this new interest in our old Hollywood Rock n' Roll scene, they were enormously great times with great music. When Eonian Records got in touch with me and asked me to co-produce and help get these bands together, I did not hesitate for even a moment. I knew just how hard it would be but I knew there was an unknown tale from our unique era which had to be told. It has been more than worth it. Fuck the mainstream media, they did not care about us then, they did not talk about us for the last 25 years. Let's see what they have to say about us now. Rock n' Roll Rebels forever!"

Jimmy Thrill of Rattlesnake Shake

EONIAN RECORDS AND THE SUNSET STRIP

Stephen Craig is the driving force behind Eonian Records and along with JohnnyX, one of the architects behind the beautiful 4 CD box set 'Rock n' Roll Rebels And Sunset Strip'. However when it comes to taking credit for this work of aural and visual art he's rather modest…

"I'd love to take the credit but the idea came from a loyal Eonian customer. She asked if the label could do a compilation series featuring various 1980s Glam and Heavy Metal scenes such as Hollywood, Chicago, Boston and so on. What still captures my imagination about the Sunset Strip scene is how competitive that era was and the following it still has nearly four decades later. West Hollywood had it all, the clubs, the magazines and one of the best radio stations in KNAC Pure Rock 105.5. Add countless major label signings, including a handful of the best-selling artists of all time, and yet there were hundreds of very talented unsigned bands. Where else in the world can you say you could find all of this in a mile-and-a-half stretch? This was West Hollywood's one and only, The Sunset Strip."

'Rock n' Roll Rebels…' isn't Eonian Records first release, with an impressive twenty-one titles released to date, the label supremo suggesting "The Shake City self titled album which was produced by Tommy Thayer of Kiss, as well as Erik Turner of Warrant, and the Murder Bay 'Never Was An Angel' album which was produced by Eric Valentine (Slash) and Rob Beaton (Guns n' Roses, Sammy Hagar)", as two of the labels most important to date.

However, there's no denying this new box-set is not only Eonian's most ambitious project, it is also arguably the best historical document of The Strip ever released.

"'Rock 'n' Roll Rebels & the Sunset Strip' Volume One features 36 bands from the 1980s and early 1990s Los Angeles Rock scene and is a four-disc collection with 72 digitally re-mastered, original studio recordings. Volume One also features a 60 page colour booklet with a close-up look at each band, over a hundred original archived photos, along with the 13 page 'Rock 'n' Roll Rebels: Sunset Strip Certified' written by JohnnyX of The Wild and Adam Gifford of Paradise, both well-respected and well-known musicians on The Sunset Strip."

Choosing favourites from the box set must be like choosing a favourite child for Stephen but if he simply had to choose three tracks which sum up the 80s and early 90s Sunset Strip, they'd be… "'Little Devils' by Charlotte; Sleazy and Heavy on the groove; think Great White, Led Zeppelin and GNR and put them in a blender. 'Betty Blue' by Shake City which has that big Hair, Arena Rock sound with perfect production and 'Paint You A Picture' by Blackboard Jungle; an irresistible upbeat song that prevents you from getting on to the next track because you keep playing it over and over. However all the bands that participated were great to work with, very appreciative and supportive. I think the biggest challenge was that I did not realise how hard many of the recordings would be to find. Not every band had immediate access to their material or even photos for that matter. Half the time I felt like a private investigator more than anything…!"

Readers of this magazine should certainly be familiar with one of the best voices in the business, Jeff Scott Soto. Whether it is with Yngwie Malmsteen, Talisman, Axel Rudi Pell, Soul Sirkus, his solo releases, W.E.T, fronting Journey or performing with the Trans-Siberian Orchestra, he is a singer who always delivers the goods. Now he has his own band, SOTO, a vehicle for him to get back to his Metal roots. James Gaden was asking the questions.

The debut SOTO album, 'Inside The Vertigo', is much heavier than your last few releases.

Yeah, as I was finding a home for it I was explaining to people what was on the agenda. I'm sure we'll discuss why I made that change and why I'm on a different label, but I kind of manifested the idea before the album was released to make sure people weren't expecting another W.E.T. sounding album!

First and foremost, SOTO is a band, this isn't a solo record, correct?

Absolutely – just to clarify, I don't want people thinking this is a project or an experiment. It did start as a solo album but it started getting heavier. I wanted to go in a heavier vein, even when I was doing 'Damage Control', but I was a little stifled by Frontiers, because they wanted to keep me firmly in the Melodic Rock field. That's great, but I felt I had enough of that in my life, from my involvement with Journey to my previous solo albums and W.E.T. I kinda wanted to get back to my roots, people do know me as a Heavy Metal singer, but the Frontiers plan was to have me as a Melodic Rock and AOR type of singer. That's fine, there's a lot of great music in that genre, it has great fans but I kind of missed the more powerful direction I left behind so many years ago. Without going directly back to that, I wanted to sort of reinvent it and acknowledge that I do have a heavier past, and this fit the bill.

Was that your primary reason for switching to earMusic?

It wasn't really about switching, it was more 'supply and demand'. I've done two great albums with W.E.T. in the Melodic Rock direction, where does that leave me to go? If I go and make an album that sounds like Talisman, that's beating a dead horse as well. I'm just repeating myself. I wanted to go to a heavier direction but in a more modern way, so it's not a throwback and I'm not repeating myself from twenty five years ago. It didn't sound like a solo album, it sounded like a band, so it's easier to brand it as a band than lump it in with my solo career. First and foremost, I asked the guys in my solo band if they wanted to be part of it. They've been with me now for five years and I wanted to offer them first the chance to come with me into the next stage of my career. They all agreed.

It's a fantastic band, I was really impressed with them on the 'One Night In Madrid' DVD. I told you last time we spoke that I absolutely loved 'Beautiful Mess' which a lot of your fans didn't connect with and I loved hearing these guys play those songs live.

I do remember you saying that, and that was one of the reasons I put this line up together, because they were more versatile than my original line up, and that's not taking anything away from Howie Simon, Gary Schutt or any of the guys who played with me before. They were more suited to a Hard Rock direction and I needed a band who could cover all the ground in a way that was believable. That's was why I put this line up together and moving forward, I wanted to bring them into the next stage of my career.

Did they help with the writing, or did you bring them songs and have them put their feel on it?

Pretty much – I had them collaborate on this album more than 'Damage Control'. Before I decided to make it a band venture, I had already gone off and found people to co-write with. It's one of those things I do when I'm writing with a guitar player – I think it feels better if the guitarist I wrote it with is on the track themselves, rather than just being the co-writer. If I co-write a song with Gus G, he sends me his tracks with what he's thinking and how it's supposed to sound. If a song starts as a collaboration, I prefer to have the collaborator's involvement on the record, rather than just have the band re-record it. The band played on the majority of the album anyway.

With you putting the band together to tour things like 'Beautiful Mess' and 'Damage Control', did you know that they were capable of writing and performing in this much heavier style?

Absolutely. It's a testament to their level of skills, what they bring to the table. They are all from different musical backgrounds. Everyone in the band, they listen to everything from Manowar and Motörhead to Hall & Oates! (laughs) It's a massive collection of influences and I know I can bring anything to them and they can pull it off. Most importantly, they are really into it. There's so many bands out there who are good and can pull things off, but they might not necessarily be into the material they're playing. That's why I gave these guys first dibs to be involved. Musically, I know we all stick together, even though we're kind of misfits. If you looked at it on paper, we have so many things we can draw on, so many influences, it's a big mish-mash, motley assortment of genres. In the end, we all shared the same vision and that's very important if it's going to be a band.

That description is pretty much how I'd describe you – you can do all kinds of stuff, from Melodic Rock to Metal to Pop to Disco – and it's not just that you're good at a variety of them, you're into all of it.

It's one way of saying I get bored easily! (Laughs) To be honest, it's one of the reasons why Queen were such a huge influence on me. They were one of the only bands who could take every genre they tapped into and master it. They weren't a band who said "Let's try this, no that doesn't work, let's try that, oh yeah, that's alright…" Everything they did, from piano ballads for Hard Rock to Pop to Opera to synth laden Disco, they mastered it and could convince people that it wasn't just an experiment, it was something they were into, as oppose to people saying "Oh Jesus, what are they trying to do now?" (Laughs)

What did you think of Queen's performance at New Year with Adam Lambert?

I have mixed feelings. First off I love Lambert, I love his voice, I love a lot of his songs from his solo stuff. I love that he sings Queen songs with such ease and seems so comfortable with it. What I miss is the energy, the level of excitement. He's vocally capable of pulling it off, but Freddie Mercury was larger than life in every way imaginable and as a frontman he could make someone at the back of Wembley Stadium, with 80,000 people, feel the same excitement as someone in the front row. I can't say I feel that excitement with the current line up, it feels a little bit safe. Regardless of that, they are still one of the greatest bands in the world and Brian and Roger have become dear friends of mine, so I've nothing negative to say about them, I support them fully because I love them and Queen so much.

I'm with you there, I'm a huge Queen fan and Adam Lambert, after my initial doubts, has started to impress me. I know not everyone is convinced but I'd rather see them out there still putting on good shows than packing it in altogether.

Exactly! I'd rather them be out playing the songs – even if they were totally half-assing it, that would still be much better than them not doing anything at all!

When you did 'Damage Control', you told me you had to piece it together from recordings done all over the world. Was it the same this time, or did you and your band get some time to spend together?

No, it's still done that way because my band are from all over the world, so we have two in Brazil, one in Spain, one in New York City and I'm in L.A. It's tough to get together, I'm all over the map with my touring and appearances so it's virtually impossible for us to spend a month and a half together to make an album all in one place. As it is, I have experience of working this way from my days with Talisman and Axel Rudi Pell, and we did it back then without the technology of today, like Pro-Tools and the internet. It's so much easier nowadays when you take advantage of technology and can communicate through things like Skype to get things done.

You handled the production yourself, didn't you?

Yes, I did. Once again, because it started as a solo album, as a solo artist I've always demanded artistic control to do what I wanted to do. I did bring my drummer, Edu Cominato, in for his influence in both the music and the production. I used his ears to get his input, along with one of my co-writers, Connor Engstrom. I really leaned on these guys for their youthfulness, the stuff that they are currently listening to which I might not necessarily have heard, to keep the album in the right direction.

When you began work on the album, was there a particular track that acted like a benchmark that helped you decide to go in a band direction?

No, I was just working with the vision that I wanted it to be heavy, I wanted it drop-tuned, rather than standard tuning, I wanted those deep, rich earthy tones. I then wanted to add grooves and different aspects to complement that. I wanted it heavy but not all sounding the same. We mixed it up.

Right – you've got some pretty heavy stuff but then you have 'When I'm Older' and the chorus on that one is really uplifting and catchy.

Thanks, I appreciate that and I'm glad you noticed. I had to be really careful with that one because that could have easily fallen into the standard Melodic Rock style. That one was a track which Edu helped keep on course. We wanted to make it sound more like a song Shinedown or Alter Bridge might cover, rather than something Winger or Whitesnake might cover! We paid close attention to that, we didn't want to fall into a Classic Rock style, we wanted it to be current Modern Rock.

'End Of Days' is nine minutes long – did you plan on including an epic track?

(Laughs) Enter Connor Engstrom for that song! His personal style is mostly instrumental music, his stuff is very much like a soundtrack. I sent him a hatful of notes saying "I want it to sound like it could be in a Bond movie, kind of a modern day 'Live And Let Die', but it needs to have an up-tempo, Iron Maiden section with Queen background vocals, a little Pink Floyd and some 'Braveheart' thrown in. Now go!" (laughs) He sent me the music, literally what you hear on the record came back to me, complete from beginning to end, just awaiting my lyrics and vocals. I thought "And what am I to do with this?" (laughs). It was one of the most challenging, demanding things of my life, to guide where that was going lyrically, melodically, it was truly one of the hardest things I've ever done.

There's an array of great guests on the album too.

Oh yeah – Joel Hoekstra is on two tracks but they haven't made the release you're listening to unfortunately. We had too many songs and the label had to make some cuts. I'm hoping the album might be successful enough that we release a deluxe edition and we can include them on there. Mike Orlando from Adrenaline Mob is on the opening track 'Final Say'. I think that could have been an Adrenaline Mob track, it's quite heavy and drop-tuned which is the way Mike writes. Gus G appears on 'Wrath' and I think that carries a Firewind-like sound because of that. You can hear the influences from the guests – Jason Bieler plays on 'Karma's Kiss' and I think that gives a real Saigon Kick vibe to it.

Do you prefer being part of a band as oppose to a solo artist?

With this, it's the best of both worlds. It's like an extension of my solo career and I called it SOTO in the same way bands were named Dio, Dokken or Van Halen. They were bands named after the key element of why that band sounded the way it did. SOTO is an extension of me, of what I want to do, so therefore I can share the experience of being the artistic ring-leader while having a band I feel comfortable with and want to bring forward with me. When a band is a democracy, you can have concerns when people bring stuff in you might not be into, or you feel doesn't fit the mould. It can cause issues and I'd prefer to follow the example where Ronnie James Dio was in charge of his band, he called it Dio and it was a band, nobody saw it as a solo project. I do miss that element of all for one, one for all but I do think there needs to be a visionary to get you there. In SOTO I drew the influences and songs from everyone but I also have the final say in what's happening, and in the end, we all enjoy what we're doing together.

Have you had any chance to get together to see how these songs will sound live for touring?

Absolutely not. (laughs) No, it's been a work in progress getting this done from beginning to end. The next stage is to put it out there and see if it sticks. I'd love to tour but I'm not going to force it. That's one of the things I'm telling management and the promoters, this is not going to be a cavalcade of Jeff Scott Soto songs, this is SOTO the band. The same way if W.E.T. tours, we don't play five or six Eclipse songs and a bunch of Talisman songs, it'll be W.E.T. material. So this won't be a bunch of stuff I did with Yngwie and things like that – maybe I'll include a couple of JSS songs which might fit this mould, but I'm certainly not going to be doing Talisman, Yngwie and Axel Rudi Pell songs with a couple of SOTO songs thrown in. That sends the wrong message, this is a proper band I'm committed to. I'm going to see how it's received and if people want to see it live - I really hope people fall for this stuff!

L E A H

Leah is a Canadian vocalist whose music sits within the Symphonic category. She first grabbed people's attention with her debut album 'Of Earth And Angels' in 2012 and followed it up with two further EPs. Her latest album 'Kings & Queens' was funded through the increasingly popular crowd-funding route and Dave Scott fired some questions to the Vancouver-based singer to find out all about it.

Why did you choose to "crowd fund" (Indiegogo) your new album?

I chose this method because it was my only option if I wanted to make more music. I have worked hard to make my music available to the world via social media platforms and have hoped that if people liked it, they would support my newest endeavour. I guess that method worked, and it paid off with the success of the campaign.

You surpassed your target ahead of the time limit that you set yourself; what were your thoughts at the moment you reached the magic mark?

I had to pinch myself...I still do. On one hand, I went into it thinking I might be a little insane, and on the other hand I went into it with the mindset that I would succeed. So it was both a shock and also not surprising at the same time, as weird as that sounds. I'm still amazed looking back though, and very excited to do it again in the future at some point.

Is there anything you might do differently if you were to take the same approach again?

I would hope to have more people helping me with the promotion of the campaign. Since I did the whole thing by myself it was a lot of pressure and I had to view it as a full-time job pretty much. It would be a lot better if you could spread tasks out within a team or with some band-mates.

Overall, how does this album compare to your previous material and how does the finished article compare to the original idea?

I think it's a combination of the two main previous releases, but it also goes beyond them in scope, diversity, heaviness, and style. I was able to explore a little more on this album because I had so much material. The songs are pretty close to how I imagined them when I first wrote them, but even better because of the musicians who played them and added their influence as well.

What lyrical themes do you explore throughout the album?

The lyrical themes range from historical fiction to Celtic folklore, stories of empires, dystopias and spiritual warfare. Songs like 'Arcadia', 'Palace Of Dreams' and 'This Present Darkness' certainly carry those themes. 'Arcadia' and its lyrics are inspired by many stories with common threads between them, such as 'Lord Of The Rings' for instance, where there is an attempt to centralize power for the "good of the people" with promises of utopian dreams, only to manifest as hell on earth. And the spark of hope as well; that it doesn't take great numbers or a large force to repair the ruins, but that evil ultimately brings destruction upon itself.

There's an historical influence on the album, are you a fan of history in general?

I am a fan of history, though I'm not as well-educated as I would like to be. Mostly these songs are in the vein of fantasy, folk or personal fiction. Sometimes I do research a topic or theme so I have more substance and material to work with, but quite often I just write off the top of my head.

Have you done anything differently here to your previous releases?

It was a fairly similar approach in that I had the core of the song there, the melody, the chord progressions and such, and fleshed it out as musicians came on board. But it was different this time in that it was all done long-distance. I recorded my pianos, keys, and vocals here in Canada, but the guitars, bass, and drums were done abroad, and produced by Timo Somers there.

You have some big names on the album in the shape of Somers (Delain) Sander Zoer (ex-Delain) and Barend Courbois (Blind Guardian); how did you get these guys involved?

I was considering my new project and was looking for the right guys and was introduced to Somers through Christian Moos of Spacelab Studios (Everon, Delain). After chatting with him about the direction and vibes of the songs and some demos, Somers knew just the right guys for bass and drums for this album. Brent Heflin McHenry out of L.A. and Oliver Philipps added additional orchestrations and keys on a few songs; that approach was more about adding the icing on the cake as the main songs were already set in stone at that point. The rest as they say is history!

You released 'Enter The Highlands' prior to the album, why was this song the first to be released publically?

I chose that song because it's one of the lengthier and more Progressive tracks; it's interesting and pretty big. "Catchiness" was not a part of the deciding factor because I mostly had my true fans in mind, not radio stations. The singles I release will be a little different.

Would you say this is the track you are most proud of or one that simply reflects the album best?

I would say neither. I chose this track purely because I was thinking of the fans who might like something interesting to chew on while they waited for the release date. Personally, my favourite tracks are 'Arcadia', 'In The Palm Of Your Hand', '... Darkness' and a few others. But I agree with what a couple people have told me, there isn't one stand alone track – it's better as a whole unit. I think people will have to hear it to see what I mean.

The album has great artwork by Jan Yrlund; how much input did you have with the artwork

Yrlund and I always discuss the concepts in depth and it's important to me that the art reflect the lyrical themes of the album as a whole, if possible. The same goes for the album title. I like to try and sum the whole album up in both the art and title. To me, the ancient ruin feel with the knight and horse, along with the "strategy" feel of the chess board and pieces fits the overall theme of the album.

Have you given any thoughts to playing live?

Yes, I have lots of thoughts of playing live. When I close my eyes and listen to the songs now, that's immediately what I picture... how it will all feel when I'm on stage with this. It's all a matter of the right timing, the right doors opening, and the right financing to make it all happen at some point. For now I think I will continue to build my fan base around the world and see what happens!

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REVOLUTION SAINTS

Interview by Mónica Castedo-López

Another fabulous supergroup emerges in the Melodic Rock scene, with an extraordinary album that will undoubtedly be compared to Journey. The American trio comprises Burning Rain's (and until recently in Whitesnake) Doug Aldrich, Night Ranger's Jack Blades and Journey's Deen Castronovo. On tours with the mighty Journey, Castronovo has showcased his heavily reminiscent of Steve Perry vocal skills, and so for the first time on a full album his main duties go beyond his usual (and sensational) drumming to become the lead singer. The fantastic guitar work from Aldrich is second to none, with so much feeling and emotion, while Jack Blades not only lays groovy bass lines but also sings co-lead on a few tracks. To top it all up, Journey's Arnel Pineda and Neal Schon appear as guests on two songs.

The person responsible for putting these three titans together was Frontiers Records' president Serafino Perugino, who explains, "I've been chasing Deen for several years. He was always too busy with Journey. I had to hammer John Baruck (Journey's manager) until he agreed, with Neal Schon's blessing and the rest is history." His belief in the band is so strong that he adds, "I can safely say this is by far one of the best AOR records of the last ten years!"

Castronovo enthusiastically recalls how it all started.

"I was in New Hampshire, I'll never forget it. I was on the road with Journey and my manager came up to me and said "Serafino wants you do to a record, do the drums on it." I said I'd be happy to do it and we negotiated everything. Then it came up that I was going to lead sing on this thing and I didn't know I was going to do that. Sure, okay, I'll do that! Then Serafino and Alessandro Del Vecchio started to get some names out for musicians on the record and Jack came up instantly. I love Jack, I've known him since I was 17, so that was a no-brainer. Then they had a couple of other guitarists that they were looking at and then they mentioned Doug Aldrich and I was like "Totally! I love that guy!" It all worked out and during breaks with Journey I would do the drum tracks and they would do the vocal tracks and there we are. This is it! This is the first time I've ever done an entire record as a lead vocalist and it's scary!"

Aldrich shares Castronovo's excitement and tells his side of the story and how unusual this approach was.

"It came together so effortlessly. Usually you join a band, you play a bunch of concerts, spend time off the road writing together. This thing came together in a very different way. It was presented to Deen first and eventually they got around to me. Deen, Jack and I were friends already so it was a no-brainer, nobody would turn down the opportunity to do a project with these guys. I jumped in and I did my part on the guitar. I knew right away when I heard what we were going to work on that it was going to be good but it turned out very special. I was very happy and surprised at how fast it came together."

Naturally, one is curious to know whether Aldrich knew about this project when he left Whitesnake in May 2014.

"I did. At the end of last year Serafino approached me around this time in 2013 to see if I wanted to be involved in a project and I said I would love to hear some of the music. Serafino asked if I could fit this in around January and February and I said absolutely. David Coverdale had told me at that time that he really didn't know when we would be working in the studio, but that January and February we would be off. So I decided to try and squeeze it in. When I was in Whitesnake I was 100% Whitesnake all the way until 2013, when I did a Burning Rain record on the weekends off. I never really had time to do anything but I knew I had these couple of months off. In the end it got pushed back a little bit and I didn't actually start working on it until May or June. It is something I could easily do when I was in Whitesnake. We started working on David's next project together and I was willing to make everything work. My schedule with Revolutions Saints was very flexible and he was really happy with what we were doing but it got to the point that he wanted me there. I needed to be with my family and needed a bit more flexibility so I could be home with my son, who is five years old. I needed to do that so I had to step away from Whitesnake. Of course Whitesnake will be fine, I know the next record is going to be awesome and he's got a fine guitarist, Joel Hoekstra, who played with Night Ranger."

As far as Jack Blades is concerned, he also recalls how long he has known Deen for and how the project came about.

"I've known Deen since he was 17 years old when he was in the Wild Dogs right back in 1994. Our writing director managed his band way back then and I used to listen to his records and his drum playing over the years, and of course Night Ranger has toured with Journey. I'm really good friends with Neal and I've co-written songs with Jonathan [Cain] and Neal on Journey records, so that camp is pretty familiar with me. I was really intrigued by the idea of doing a record with Deen singing all the stuff because earlier this year Neal Schon released a solo record where Deen sang on some stuff and Neal asked me to come down and co-write the lyrics with him, so I did. The opportunity for Deen to sing lead and step out and sing on everything was pretty exciting; playing with Deen is always fun because he is a crazy drummer."

As with other supergroups, it is inevitable to ask if they are comfortable with the term and whether they should be called a band or a project. Castronovo sheds some light in his own humble manner.

"I'm not uncomfortable with the supergroup thing. I think that Doug and Jack will be the super and I'm just part of the group! All three of us want to be a band. After we've done this – and so far I think we're getting a good response and good reviews – we'll end up doing another record. If we can, I would love it!"

There is also the arduous question of playing live and how feasible that would be. Blades is optimistic.

"Deen and I thought it would be a crime not to play these songs. As long as we can keep it fun I think it would be really fun to play with these guys, a power trio. At this stage of the game, if it's not fun, what's the point?"

Castronovo is even more specific.

"There are talks about maybe doing some festivals in the UK and Milan but nothing is set in stone yet. We are going to do a couple of weeks' rehearsals and just get to know each other as players and definitely mesh that way. Jack and Doug are consummate professionals and it should be no problem as a band to gel instantly. Europe is the place we think we're going to end up breaking. European audiences are so much more open-minded to this kind of music, especially the UK."

"I would think that there is a strong possibility that there is a second record," Aldrich adds. "I think that obviously everyone can write and it would be cool to write for Revolution Saints. One of the things that is really interesting about Revolution Saints is that it has its own unique sound and I want to make sure that we maintain that; it's a heavy Melodic Rock record, something that I think is slightly different, at least to anything I've ever played on. Deen has Journey and Jack has Night Ranger and they're both working bands that have big followings and they have responsibilities to those bands first. I'm actually involved in a production in Las Vegas at the moment, 'Raiding The Rock Vault', at the Tropicana Hotel. It is basically a supergroup cover band: it has Hugh McDonald from Bon Jovi, Robin McAuley from MSG, Jay Schellen from Hurricane and Asia and Badfinger. I love it and what I love most about it is that I'm able to be with my family, and I am loving being off the road for most of the time. But I think it would be great to play some shows with the guys. We can definitely put together a kick-ass set: songs from Revolution Saints, maybe throw in a Night Ranger or a Damn Yankees song or some of the later Whitesnake stuff that I worked on. I would love to hear 'Love Will Set You Free' sang by Jack."

One cannot help but wonder how exhausting the combination of playing drums and singing a full set may be for the drummer.

"I know! I'm going to do the best I can and I actually talked to Jack this morning about how

we're going to go about it: possibly putting me upfront and get an unknown drummer with amazing chops."

It is no secret that the main and almost sole songwriter for the album has been Frontiers regular Alessandro Del Vecchio, who also recorded the keyboards. All three members are surely used to being more involved in the writing process in the bands they form or have formed part of in their extensive careers.

"It was fun and interesting," Aldrich confesses, "because Alessandro was open to some suggestions where he would let me change parts or play them my own way or change the arrangements a little bit. It is a different prospective, it was a very easy and fresh way to work when the songs are presented already to you. Alessandro let me do whatever I wanted to do but a lot of the stuff was already pre-laid."

For Castronovo it was pretty much the same easy ride.

"The drum tracks were very simple because I talked to Jack, Alessandro and Doug and we all knew to just be yourself, so there are a lot of licks and chops on there but that is how I play. As far as the vocals, I had ten days off between the Journey gigs to do the vocal tracks. Alessandro had the lyrics, the melodies and everything nailed down so he guided me through the whole thing. Huge credit and respect for Alessandro as a songwriter, as a singer, as a musician and as a producer."

Blades highlights the trust element.

"We trusted each other to take it to where it needed to go in the way that we played. Dean recorded the drums, sent it to me, I put the bass along with that knowing full well that Doug would fill in because of his instincts to be able to do that. He's such a great guitar player. And really this record is all about instincts and trusting one's instincts and trusting one another's instincts."

The comparison with Journey on this record is inevitable and none of the band members are oblivious to that.

"I can see that a lot of the music was written with that in mind," Blades admits, "and I think it's easy for Deen because that is his world. It would be an easy transition for him to immediately start doing it and doing it with music which is Journey reminiscent."

"The songs are definitely along the Journey line," Castronovo confirms, "and vocally Steve Perry still is my most influential singer. I grew up listening to him and he's my favourite singer of all time and one of the greatest song writers of my generation, so it is inevitable that I am going to sound like him. I am grateful that I am allowed to do Journey songs and I am going to sound a little bit like him but I'm trying to be as much as myself as I can. We all have influences: as a drummer mine were Steve Smith, Terry Bozzio and Peter Criss. Steve Perry was my ultimate singer. Nobody can touch him, he is a god."

About the involvement of his two band mates in Journey, Castronovo enthuses, "We asked Neal to play 'Way To The Sun' and he killed it. Then Arnel, come on, what a singer! Listen to him on 'You're Not Alone'. It's frightening how amazing that guy is. I'm surrounded by the best of the best here."

Despite all three members being equally thrilled with the results, picking their favourite songs proves to be tricky.

"I would probably say 'Here Forever'," Aldrich reflects, "because every record needs a cornerstone track that is not the hit single. It's something that is slightly more personal and has a different feel. Obviously I really enjoy all the songs and 'In The Name Of The Father' is a beautiful song. 'Turn Back Time' is the first single and it's awesome hearing Jack and Deen play together. But sometimes I love the deeper songs. I love 'Way To The Sun', I think that is a masterpiece track with Neal Schon playing a solo".

Blades ponders: "'How To Mend A Broken Heart' is a cool song and there are three or four songs that I like a lot, like 'Turn Back Time'".

Castronovo seems to sit in the middle of the two

"I love 'Turn Back Time'. That is a huge one for me because that was the first one we did, the first one I played drums on and the first one I tackled vocally. Also 'In The Name Of The Father', which is a song about Serafino's father, that is a huge one. There's some great stuff on this record."

Finally, the bassist reveals how the name for the band came up.

"I came up with the Saints part. There were ideas floating around and Serafino or someone mentioned this music would be a great revolution. I said we should call it Revolution Saints and Doug said 'That's great!' and Serafino loved it. Names are really difficult and there were a lot of them being floated around, not by us but by other people and the record company that didn't feel right, but the idea of putting the two words together instantly felt right. We all looked at each other and that was it, we loved it."

The debut Revolution Saints album is undoubtedly a serious contender for best album of the year and we keep our fingers crossed that the band will play live soon!

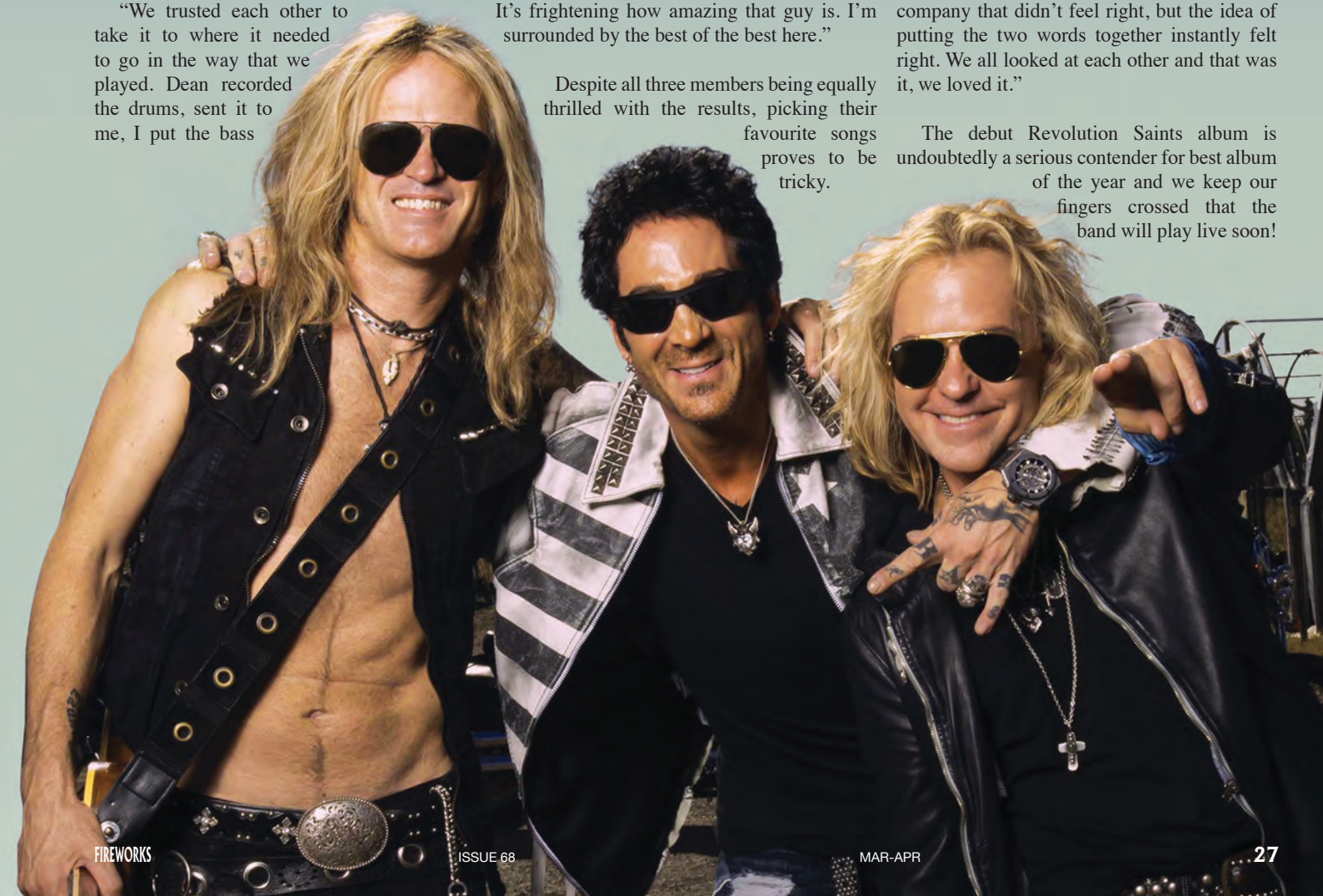

Photo: Gustav Sandholm

One of the most exciting bands to come out of Sweden in the last few years, and let's face it, there have been a lot, H.e.a.t have become renowned for their explosive live performances. Now, as they prepare to release their 'Live In London' album, Sue Ashcroft spoke to guitarist Eric Rivers about how the band have progressed to become the tight unit they now are.

Why did you decide to record a live album in London?

I guess on paper London had the most pre-sales and would be the biggest crowd and the easiest show to record. But afterwards I would probably have recorded another show as we had some technical difficulties in London. Plus it also had a certain ring to the title, 'Live In London', which sounds nice.

Are you happy with the way that it turned out?

Yeah very happy! Tobias Lindell mixed it... if we sound that good live then we must be a pretty good band! He made it sound really, really good. After a show you always have a feeling like... it was a bad show, it was an okay show or it was an awesome show... I think the London show for all of us, with all the technical difficulties and stuff that we had, had kind of a bad vibe after it and especially knowing it was going to be recorded. Then when we heard what Lindell had done with it, it sounds great"!

This year you seem to have managed to get all the big festivals. Which do you think you are looking forward to the most?

Oh wow... I don't know. The Sweden Rock Festival is special to us what with being Swedish; playing there is like the biggest thing you can do in Sweden and tell all your friends about. But there are so many bigger and as equally cool festivals in the rest of Europe and the world. We played Download before and that is a great, great festival as well. I think all of these festivals, Hard Rock festivals, are pretty similar in a way; it's always very peaceful and friendly because everyone has the same kind of interests. If you go to some of these other festivals, you have all the different genres and people hate each other and fight but it is always peaceful and friendly at the Hard Rock festivals and that is what I love about them.

Things have changed so much within the band, how is the dynamic with you all now?

I think very good you know, we are getting more professional in a way, and especially learning the business part of everything. When we were playing Firefest for the first time, we kind of knew how to write songs and that was it; it was fun to be in a band. But nowadays it is more like a company that we have to run and be smart business wise, just to make some money and make our living out of this. So it is very good and everybody has their own part in this company. It's more serious but a lot better.

How did it feel when Dave Dalone said he wanted to leave? How did you feel because it impacted on you more than anyone else?

Yeah sure it did. It was a thing that had been talked about for some time and he continued and still enjoyed playing live but he kind of grew tired of all the travelling and the style of music as well. We kind of knew it was coming but when it hits you, it is a big thing. For me it was a very big chance being the only guitar player and we talked about if we should bring someone else in. I said that I at least wanted to try and be the only guitar player and we did a few festival shows that summer, with me being the only guitar player and I think it worked out fine. It sounded kind of the same, a bit different, but still we didn't feel the loss of a guitar. I think you need something extreme like this to develop as a guitar player, otherwise you just do the same thing night after night.

Are you now writing songs for a new studio album?

Right now we are kind of on a vacation from the band... we decided to take January off from all the boring band stuff and rehearsals. We planned last January; we are still writing songs and I am going to write tomorrow even though we are not doing a lot of band stuff now; you've always got to keep it up. We have a few good songs already completed but we are going to start writing for real in February and March for the next album.

How did you feel to be able to play at the very last Firefest?

Firefest has been a huge thing for us since the first show there. It has had such a big impact on the U.K. market, in fact not just the U.K. but Europe and the world because there are people from so many different countries going there. That last show, we tried not to think about it too much; that it was the last one and we thought about all these crazy ideas... guest artists on every song... when you think about it, it is better to just do a good H.e.a.t show because that is what people want to see I guess. But it was great, it was good as always; a great crowd and we always try to stay there the entire festival, which says a lot about the festival you know... we want to be there.

You all seem to have so much energy, especially Erik Gronwall, how does he do that? How is he so hyper active on stage?

I have no idea but it is fun... when you watch yourself, like see a video clip of yourself on stage, you always feel that you gave more, you head-banged even more than it looked like on stage. It feels like you're doing a lot more than it shows on the video and he looks absolutely crazy and mental on videos as well; he must have the biggest adrenaline flow in the universe or something.

So apart from all the festivals, will you be doing other dates?

Yes, we have some shows in Sweden in about three weeks with Hardcore Superstar and a few other Swedish bands and we are hoping to get even more festivals this summer; we will also just be writing songs, trying to make a good fifth... or is it sixth album depending if you count the live one? The release of that is kind of a weird thing because we haven't really done anything other than play the show in London. We were finished with the album after that, so that release feels a bit weird to us because we haven't really "worked" on it; it is just something that comes out!

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THUNDER

In a twenty-five-plus year history, Thunder have become one of the U.K.'s most beloved Rock acts. The excellent 'Wonder Days' is their first recorded work in seven years, as they had decided to call it a day following the release of 'Bang' in 2008, although guitarist Ben Matthews was unable to perform on the new material due to illness. Ant Heeks discusses the 'Wonder Days' past and present with vocalist Danny Bowes and guitarist Luke Morley.

How is Ben doing?

Danny: Ben is fine, recovering slowly. He had a pretty torrid time last year and the treatment was pretty unpleasant and it's left him very, very low, but he's recovering, slowly but surely. Every week he seems to get a bit better.

Will he be fit in time for the tour?

Danny: We sincerely hope so

You went out with a 'Bang' in 2008, so what was the catalyst in getting Thunder back together?

Luke: it was a mixture of several things really. In between then and now we'd done a couple of Christmas shows, which is kind of an ongoing thing and we got back together to play High Voltage, which was fun. We'd agreed that we would go out and do other festivals in 2013 and as a result of that we were offered a slot on the Journey and Whitesnake thing and as we were gonna be rehearsed up and in the room anyway we thought "why the hell not?" **Luke:** Yeah, it's one of those things where we've always been very available, we've never been a starry kind of band who didn't involve themselves with the punters, we've always done meet and greets after every show since the band started, way before other bands were doing it. The fact that we're available to our punters has kind of cemented that loyalty, in a way. We've engaged with them at every opportunity and I think that the fact that the band is consistently good as a live band, people know that if they come and see a Thunder show they're going to get their money's worth, and I think that's really important.

Is it easy to slip back into the routine of being in Thunder when you've all been working on different projects?

Danny: Yeah, it is, I think the strangest thing about the two years that we had apart in 2000 and 2002, and the same thing again between 2009 and 2011, both times there were two years where we didn't meet up very much, we talked on the phone because we're in business together and we have been since 1989, but when we got back together each time it was almost like that two years didn't happen. We never even thought about it until afterwards, on both occasions and we always got together to rehearse for something we were going to do, it was always quite amazing just how straightforward it all was and we just carried on like nothing had happened.

On to the excellent new album 'Wonder Days', did you specifically intend to do something different with this album?

Luke: Not really, it's just a question of once we decided to do it I started writing the songs and over the process of doing that and making the demos and everything, we had the best part of nine months before we started recording anything. Then the writing was ongoing while we were recording. So we went along and recorded the tunes in a few batches and at the end of the day we had too many, so we picked what we felt when put together would make the strongest collection.

Danny: I think the process itself, by doing it in chunks instead of doing it in one hit in itself made it quite an interesting and slightly different process and I think personally we ended up with a better album as a result.

Would you agree that it doesn't sound like a typical Thunder album?

Luke: I think if you look at the album, there's one song that probably Folkier than anything we've ever done before, the upside of that is just where the songs take you. I don't think that any of us are kind of close in certain areas of music and the thing that we always try to do is just treat each song as sympathetically as possible and play it as we see it. And I think we're all confident enough in our own musicality and our own musical identity that if it takes us down a few different roads then that's fine. I think all great bands have done that over the years, Queen, Zeppelin, whoever it is, they're not afraid to go in a few different directions and it's the same with us, we just let the song take us where we go really.

> "I think what's interesting to me about this is that this record is slightly different in some ways because I think we weren't probably good enough to play some of these songs twenty years ago."
>
> **Danny Bowes of Thunder**

Danny: I think what's interesting to me about this is that this record is slightly different in some ways because I think we weren't probably good enough to play some of these songs twenty years ago. As musicians our abilities have improved with age, maybe we're just slow learners, I don't know, but we have improved with age and our ability to play these songs is greater than it was twenty years ago, so I think there is definitely some tunes on this record that maybe wouldn't have been able to record.

Well that makes me think of the lyrics of the songs 'Wonder Days' and 'When The Music Played'. Has 25 years of Thunder made you feel more reflective?

Danny: I don't necessarily think it's 25 years of Thunder, I just think it's 25 years older. I think that happens as you get older, you start to realise that there's more time behind you that there is ahead of you! (laughs) It naturally makes you want to look back.

Luke: Yeah. Everybody does that, you re-evaluate yourself, your life and everything as you go and sometimes when you're writing you're looking for inspiration or things that are at the forefront of your thinking when you sit down with a guitar and start writing. Whatever's floating through your brain at the time is very likely to come out in the song and obviously, as Danny said, you get to a certain age and when there's more behind you than there is in front you tend to focus on it and if you can turn that into inspiration for something, then great.

So are you planning for another record or are you just going to take things one step at a time?

Danny: We've only just finished this one, give us a break! (laughs) Well, we're back! We debated long and hard before we agreed that we would commit ourselves to making this record and releasing it. You're talking about a long chunk of time commitment and, like I said before, we wanted to make sure that we gave it it's best shot when we did it and to do that we had to have a big discussion with ourselves internally within the band to make sure that everybody was prepared to do that. So as far as we're concerned this album is made, we're very proud of it, we're looking forward to releasing it and letting Thunder fans hear it, and hopefully unleashing it on the wider world and it will give us some opportunity to go out and play live. When we get about six or seven months into the release I dare say we'll have a really clear idea of where we're going and then our minds will naturally turn to what we'll do next.

Regarding the tour, why did you decide to play three shows in Arenas rather than the regular, longer Theatre tour?

Danny: Well the first reason was that we'd been away for a while and during that time we were away we'd been playing Christmas shows, and the Christmas shows got bigger every year. Each time we'd announce a Christmas show it'd sell out and we'd have to put another one on sale and each year consequently we up scaled the size of the venue.

That was the first thought, there was a clue in there that something was changing from a kind of audience perception and audience loyalty, it seemed apparent that were fans coming on board all the time, despite our lack of recording and releasing records. The second reason was that Ben got ill, and when Ben got ill we knew that we had to commit to making the record and releasing the record, and we'd already committed ourselves to the release date, but we didn't know long it would take Ben to get back to full strength. So rather than take a chance and book our usual nine or ten date tour in Theatres and go up and down the country, we were very concerned that Ben might not be strong enough, or might not have the bullets in his physical gun to be able to get through that number of shows slinging a Les Paul about every night. So we thought if we do less shows and make them bigger it might not be quite as perfect from an audience point of view because people will end up having to travel, but at least we won't end up having to cancel the shows. We'd prefer to have done more, but it's where we're at, we had to make a judgement based on what we thought was going to be possible, we didn't want to let anybody down, it was very important that we got it right.

Danny, not being a prolific writer, what's it like to be able to work with somebody like Luke who can give you so many great lyrics to interpret?

Danny: To be honest with you, that's something that never fails to amaze me. Whenever Luke writes a whole bunch of tunes he sends them over and after this many years there are some songs where I kind of go "I've heard this one, and I've heard this one", but then every now and again he does something that completely blows me away and surprises the daylights out of me and I think "this is incredible!" I never fail to be amazed by that because we've known each other for forty-odd years, he started writing songs nearly forty years ago, and in that forty years I've sung nearly every song he wrote, with the exception of the two albums he wrote with The Union, most of those songs I've sung. There's hundreds of songs, I'm sure, it's a big achievement and I'm obviously chuffed to pieces that he's still able to do that. Otherwise I wouldn't have much of a career!

From your perspective Luke, what's it like having a singer who can put so much power and emotion into your, sometimes personal, lyrics?

Luke: Danny's ability as a singer is obvious, but I think the connection, the fact that we've known each other so long and the relationship musically between us has evolved into something more than I write the songs and he sings them. There's a kind of telepathy and empathy that happens. To be honest it's not something we ever think about that hard.

Danny: No, we never think about it and we don't talk about it either. It just happens.

Luke: I think a lot of it is to do with the fact that we're the same age, we went to the same school, the same social clubs, I think possibly the fact that our lives have run quite closely together means that our fields of experience have been very similar, and particularly so with music. Our taste in music is very similar and that's true of the singers we both listen to. If I could sing I'd be the best singer in the world, fortunately, I can't! (laughs) So hopefully when I write I'm aware of how singers are going to interpret and when they're going to breathe and all that sort of stuff, but at the end of the day they still need to be able to do it and Danny does it better than most people on the planet. I'm very fortunate that I've worked with singers like Danny and Peter (Shoulder) in The Union, I spent a short time working with Robert Palmer, and all good singers do the same thing, they take the song, look at it, think about it, and they'll just add something which is totally unique. That's why there will always be new people coming through putting a new slant on things, and Danny does it better than most.

What do you think is the key to Thunder's success?

Danny: I think we've got a good work ethic. We don't take ourselves too seriously but we do take our business very seriously. We've always tried to make the best records we could, we've always tried to give as much as we could from a live point of view, we need to make the most of every opportunity when it comes along, whilst at the same time trying not to disappear up our own arses in terms of self-importance. I think that if you're honest with yourself and you're honest with your audience about what you're doing and give good value for money, then hopefully that is rewarded by audience loyalty. Whether or not we've achieved that all the time I don't know, but I think we've achieved it most of the time.

Luke: Yeah, it's a strange business, this. There's lots of hype, lots of things get talked up into being the next biggest thing when they really aren't. I think with Rock music, because it's terminally unfashionable, or it seems to be, particularly Classic Rock, it's very truthful. You have the band, you have the audience, that's all you have. It's not being pumped out on the radio twenty-four hours a day, it's not all over the media, it's very under the radar in a way, and that's one of the reasons why it never goes away. It never gets over-exposed, and within that genre I think the thing that makes Thunder a little bit different from that is there aren't any other bands that play the same style of music as we play, which is English Bluesy Rock. You have to be certain vintage to play what we play, somebody who's twenty or thirty years younger than us wouldn't play the same way or sing the same way, that's where we came from. The fact that we work hard at it and give the best value we can, and if you come to a Thunder show it should make you feel a lot better about yourself, not worse, when you roll all that together, people like it. At the end of the day, people keep coming, people keep buying the records, so we must be doing something right.

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UFO

After 46 years and 22 studio albums it is safe to say that UFO are something of a Rock music institution. There seems to be no signs of the band slowing down in 2015 with the imminent release of a new CD, 'A Conspiracy Of Stars', and a tour to follow. Dave Bott caught up with Paul Raymond (keyboards/guitar) to run through a number of topics including the new album, a chequered history and optimistic future, plus Paul's ongoing solo work.

Who was responsible for writing the new songs?

The writing was done mainly by Phil (Mogg) and Vinnie (Moore). I have a couple of songs on there, 'King Of The Hill' and 'The Real Deal'. The opening number, 'The Killing Kind', was actually written by our bass player, Rob DeLuca, and that's a really cool song to get things started. The writing process was better than it has been on recent records. This time we had the facility to jam the material and we haven't done that for a long while. Rob and Vinnie were over in the UK with us for three weeks and we had extensive rehearsals at Bernie Torme's gaff and that was fun. Bernie was there and though obviously we didn't ask him to play, it was nice to chat as I hadn't seen him since the 80s.

The internet makes recording an album much easier. Has the creation process settled into a comfortable format now?

Well working in the studio for the new album was certainly a step in the right direction. It will never be like it was back in the old days because it just costs too much money now. We used to waste so much money when we were making a record by doing endless rehearsing and spending so much time in the studio getting things right. I just think bands of our era did that. Everything now has a budget. Vinnie did all the guitar parts at home and sent them through electronically but I don't think they're any worse for that (laughing). The bass and drums went down on the spot and I did some overdubs on the keyboards. 'King Of The Hill' was the last track we laid down and aside from a few vocal overdubs we kept everything as it was recorded during the first take.

Did Phil provided all the lyrics as he usually does?

(Laughs) I think Rob tried to put some words into Phil's head at one point but he doesn't know the ropes properly yet... next question! (laughing).

What made you use Chris Tsangarides to produce the album?

Well that young Quireboys fellow Spike is a good friend of ours and suggested we use him as he's old school in approach and nearly as old as us! (laughs) Phil and me went to see him and though he only has a small facility we took a great liking to him and he has a million stories to tell. From my point of view it was great because Chris plays keyboards and was constantly pushing me to try things. I haven't had that from a producer for a long time, possibly Ron Nevsion. Ron doesn't play but he's a great ideas guy, just like Chris. We were surprised that our paths hadn't crossed before, though I believe he was assistant engineer on the 'Phenomenon' record when it was recorded at Morgan Studios back in the early 70s.

Pete Way hasn't been part of the UFO line-up for a while now - is anyone in contact with him?

I believe Andy (Parker) has had a couple of conversations with him but I haven't spoke to him since he left the band. I know the problems with his drinking made him ill, which obviously I was sorry to hear about, but I've heard he's doing OK now and has just done a record with Mike Clink. We were looking for someone English ideally, or British, but Rob's played with us for a while now and even though he's American (laughs) he got the job. We've even let him be in the photographs! (laughs)

Is it still exciting after so long in the business or does it get harder to motivate yourself now for the whole album/tour cycle?

Well it's what we do, we're professional musicians. Sometimes I ask myself if I'm getting too old for it (70 this year) but my wife reminded me that I'm so lucky to be doing something that I enjoy and love. It won't be something that will be easy to walk away from, though I suppose it will have to come to an end some time. Back in the 70s it was non-stop. You were only given a short time before another record was expected. Substance abuse and drinking helped, (laughs) but looking back it's incredible how we made such great music with all that was going on around us.

With almost 250 songs to choose from, how do UFO choose a set-list for the shows? There have been criticisms in the past about the lack of variety.

I know people would love to hear some of the more obscure songs. We really need to do something about that. I've actually been putting some songs in my own shows that wouldn't normally feature in a UFO set. I have to justify their inclusion by saying there was a significant keyboard part or that I played on the album or had a hand in writing the song but people have been going mad for the 'No Place To Run' songs I've been doing. Maybe, as UFO, we could learn from that? My favourite UFO album happens to be 'No Heavy Pettin' and I didn't play on that album. I love the likes of 'On With The Action', 'Natural Thing', 'Highway Lady' and 'Can You Roll Her'. They would be great to play live again.

Is there anything left for you personally or the band to achieve?

My new record 'Rewind 50', a celebration of 50 years in the music business, has just been released and I also have another record that unfortunately I can't give any details about just yet... maybe in a couple of years. Realistically UFO have probably achieved everything we set out to. It would be nice to get together the line-up from the 70s while we're all still alive. Michael is doing really well at the moment and he's in great shape so I don't even know if he would entertain something like that. It would be nice to do one more time though. The likes of 'Lights Out' and 'Obsession' are nearly 40 years old now and that's frightening to think about… lets change the subject!

FURYON

Brighton-based Furyon first appeared with their debut 'Gravitas' in 2010, led by ex-Pride members Matt Mitchell (vocals) and Chris Green (guitars), along with drummer Lee Farmery and bassist Alex "Nickel" Bowen. Chris Green left the band and moved to the U.S.A. and formed Rubicon Cross and joined Tyketto, while Furyon eventually enlisted two new guitarists in the shape of newcomers Luca Faraone and Tiago Rosado. However, in the meantime Green returned to the band briefly to co-write a second album with Matt Mitchell and, once again hooking up with acclaimed producer Rick Beato, Furyon have delivered the excellent 'Lost Salvation'. Ant Heeks spent an hour catching up with a very chatty Matt Mitchell to get the full inside story.

Going back to the release of 'Gravitas', you initially released it independently in 2010 then it was picked up by Frontiers two years later, there were numerous problems getting it out there, but in comparison the deal for 'Lost Salvation' has been completed fairly quickly, what has made the difference?

With everything that's happening now with Dream Records and Cargo, Cargo obviously are doing the distribution, they showed interest straight away. Dream Records, being a small European label, had actually folded a few years earlier but has been re-opened as a platform for the album, but at the same time now we've done that, certain other labels have contacted us with an interest for a third album, now that's exactly the kind of talk I wanna hear! This specific label are a very good, established label so that's very exciting, and they're interested in putting it out in the States and Japan. We are gonna do a big push in the U.S. and Canada in all the Best Buy stores over there, and Nikki Sixx has his own shelf in those. Then of course it opens doors to re-release 'Gravitas', because in America 'Gravitas' had absolutely no promotion, it was very hard. Bless Frontiers, they took it on, and to this day I still really thank them for that because the album had been given away by Metal Hammer at that point, so for Frontiers to put it out was a really decent thing for them to do. But, and no disrespect to them, their promotion lacked, but that's just the way they do things. 'Gravitas' had a really tough time getting out there, but we were a brand new band, now the name's a little more established. It's hard though these days, no-one's really putting lots of money into bands, except for a couple of the lucky ones out there, the industry's a lot different these days.

So what exactly is Chris Green's contribution to 'Lost Salvation'?

Chris and I wrote the album. He's my buddy, he's a good egg, and we write good songs together. Between 'Gravitas' and 'Lost Salvation' we had about three or four years, but when Chris and I decided to write the album we had it all written and demoed within a few months, the process of writing it was super quick. I'd be recording stuff here and sending it to him in the States, he'd record stuff and send it to me, and that means of technology is just amazing isn't it? But at the same time, we can't be a band, it just doesn't work, someone living on the other side of the world just doesn't work because you would have to put a lot of effort in. So Chris Green's involvement with Furyon and 'Lost Salvation' at the moment is, he collaborated on writing it with myself and then we recorded it. I think that anybody who listens to the album can hear Chris's signature sound.

But he had already left Furyon at that point, so why did he come back?

Well, after Chris left we tried to carry on as a four-piece with Pat Heath taking on the role of sole lead guitarist, but it became apparent that role was too much for Pat. Not playing-wise because he's just one of the best guitar players out there, but he decided it just wasn't for him. To be honest, the band was heartbroken, but tried to carry on. In the midst of all that stuff it felt as though everybody would jump ship and I felt like I was this crazy man up in the rigging just hanging on, with a bottle of Rum and one finger up at the sky! (laughs) I'll never forget, when Pat left we had a Spain tour booked and I didn't know what we were going to do, but then Chris called me and said "I've just seen Pat's left the band, what are you gonna do?" It was great that he took the time to call me, but I said "I don't know." We were several weeks away from the tour so to get somebody else to come in and play, they are such big guitar shoes to fill, to get someone to learn ten or twelve songs is quite a job. Then Chris said, bless him, "I'll come and do it!" We did the Spain tour, which was great, then Chris suggested that maybe we should write an album. I couldn't say that would happen for the third album because the line-up now, these two new guys are great. Luca Faraone, he's only 24 but he's a great, great player, and Tiago Rosado is like the Izzy Stradlin' of the band, he has a great sound, a great look, and just holds that rhythm guitar down. It's awesome.

Where did you find the new guys?

Well me and Lee Farmery (drums) play a lot of cover gigs as well and these guys are on the same cover circuits, that's where we first started talking about it. I remember first asking Tiago to join a long time ago, but he said (adopting a bad Portuguese accent) "I don't think I could play those solos!" That was the shoes he had to fill, it wasn't like joining the band to do a third album which might have a slightly different feel to it, but playing someone else's songs you've got to play those solos, because if somebody came out and didn't play those solos people would miss them. But then Luca came along and said he would be able to play those solos, so we went back to Tiago and asked him to come in as a second guitar player. When we're on stage it's not alien because we've done a lot of gigs with these guys, they're good guys. That's the thing, Pat and Chris are nice guys too, but these new guys are very easygoing – they're either trained well or their egos haven't appeared yet!

Why did you decide to work with Rick Beato again?

I literally had an e-mail from him saying "Are we gonna do this second album, or what?!" He's really up-front! Anyway, bless his Sicilian heart, he basically did this album for us on Mates Rates, we don't have much money, this album was fronted by just us, nobody else was putting into it. He gave us this amazing offer, and everybody started scrabbling around to get the money together. I called Nickel (Alex "Nickel" Bowen, bass) and said "get yourself down onto Brighton Pier and sell something man!" (laughs) We managed to do it. And we are really proud of it, I include Chris in this too, I see Chris as a major part of this too because he played on it.

Was it strange to have Chris write and record the album, knowing that he wouldn't be around when it came to promoting and performing it?

Yeah, of course, but we knew that this was going to be the case. If I had the choice I would just have the original band just as it was, but who wouldn't? That's not saying I don't love the band as it is now, because I do, it's morphed into something else, but that's life in itself, things move forward, things change. But yeah, I did feel funny about it, knowing I couldn't get too happy and in love with it because it was going to go away, especially for me. It's probably the biggest heartbreak in your life as a songwriter and performer, even people like yourself Ant, who write and love the music, it becomes a heartbreak when you try and do something and it doesn't work because you have to put so much into it, the music becomes your life.

What has influenced your lyrics for this album?

There's a lot to do with changes. 'These Four Walls' is quite dark, it's about one's closed-in state of mind, not necessarily me or a certain person, but that can be related to many things, a terrible relationship with whoever, or even with your worklife, it's a trapped situation. Again, it's like the post-apocalyptic situation, "I'm trapped in here but outside could be even worse!" The song 'Lost Salvation' is lyrically, I guess, pointing fingers at people that have fucked you over, picked you up and put you down, people that go along with things because it's cool and happening right now, like the music industry itself and the people in the hierarchy who make all the decisions, like "you need to cut all your hair off and grow a beard" and later saying "you need to shave that beard off and grow your hair down to your arse." Somebody is always in control. In the bigger sense of the industry, like in the Pop world, it's like (adopts robotic voice) "this is what you are going to like this year!" I mean, if all of a sudden thousands and thousands of pounds were put into Furyon and it was slapped on everybody's TV's, of course there'd be a lot of people who wouldn't like it, but there could be thousands of people going "oh this is cool!" It's because we eat what's in the shops. It's just the way of the world, and I'm not saying we just get force-fed crap because there is some amazing things out there, but nothing you haven't seen before.

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Power Metal band Orden Ogan don't have a massive profile here in the UK, yet they're big news at home in Germany. According to band leader Sebastian 'Seeb' Levermann it was the release of their first proper album 'Vale' on a record label Yonah and the recruiting of management and booking agents that set them on their way. Mixing Folk and Progressive elements into their music and with striking videos to match they're certainly memorable. Having just released their fourth major record (fifth in total) 'Ravenhead', it went straight to #1 in the Amazon Power Metal charts on day of release and has currently risen to #16 in the German National charts. Carl Buxton got the chance to put some questions to Sebastian Levermann whilst he was on tour.

I can't recall many albums, if any, where a band leader has written the music for a number of songs primarily with their drummer and a handful with their bassist, whilst eschewing the lead guitarist. What do Dirk, and Niels bring to the table that Tobi doesn't or can't?

This time it was all about having the time to be able to work on stuff. Tobi had some stuff in his private life that he had to settle and a lot of work to do. Niels and Dirk simply had more time, or let's say they were able to take more time themselves for the song writing process and the studio recordings. Tobi did compose and play his solos though and also some rhythm guitars.

Orden Ogan roughly translates as "Order Of Fear". Who originally came up with the name?

I started making music with our ex-drummer Ghnu back in 1996. We were pupils; the band was a garage band back then. There have been times when we were totally inactive because we had no working line up or whatever, but the name was around already back then. We count the history of Orden Ogan realistically from 2008 onwards, when our first record 'Vale' was released through a label and other people - management, booking agents, etc - started working for the band. We kept the name as homage to the "old days". It's a made up phrase, but it's unique and pretty catchy as soon as you have it.

You've used Chris Boltendahl (Grave Digger) and Joachim Cans (Hammerfall) to contribute vocals to two songs, 'Here At The End Of The World' and 'Sorrow Is Your Tale'. How did they get involved?

I am not a big fan of name-dropping. If we work with people it has to fit on several levels. We have to like the people and the song has to have the need for another voice. We were on tour with Grave Digger in 2011 and became friends. I was asked to sing in the choir on the latest Grave Digger record and as soon as we were finished, Chris offered to sing on our record in exchange. The very moment he asked I already knew on which song and in which part that would be. Perfect fit.

On 'Sorrow Is Your Tale' we felt that we needed another voice in the bridge part. That was at the time when the Orden Ogan/ HammerFall tour was being confirmed – so that was really an obvious choice.

The video for the first single *'F.E.V.E.R'* is typically lavish with a lot of Pagan imagery. Why is the spelling of the song the way it is, why did you choose this song as the first single and who came up with the video concept?

The video concept features a lot of scenes that loosely follow the concept story of the record. If you read the lyrics you will find a lot of parallels. It was very tricky to pick 'F.E.V.E.R' as the first single because we all felt that the songs on 'Ravenhead' are all pretty much on the same level. And the spelling; it looks better than just "Fever", ha ha ha!

You write all the lyrics yourself and some of the songs such as "A Reason To Give" seem quite cryptic. Do you find it easy to write in English with all the conceptual pieces and topics that you choose to write about?

It's not hard to write in English at all actually; German is actually a lot harder, though I have to say that I always have my lyrics checked by an English native speaking linguist, because you just have a different feeling for some phrases when you are German. Most of the time it's fine straight away. 'A Reason To Give' actually isn't that cryptic at all. Maybe it just takes a couple of plays until you get the images. It's about the picture people have of themselves and about actually betraying or lying to themselves just to come close to how they think they should appear, instead of just only being and doing what would actually feel best for them.

For anybody out there that hasn't heard about Orden Ogan how would you describe yourselves to them?

Orden Ogan is melodic Power Metal with a lot of different influences. The trademarks are hard, heavy riffs – so maybe think adding a little Metallica to Power Metal; big choruses with sing-along melodies; always a little melancholic, never cheesy, and with a lot of Folk, modern and Classical elements.

You have a fabulous image that goes hand in hand with your music. Was it a conscious decision to have an identifiable image from the beginning or has it evolved with time?

It somehow sort of evolved really, yes. We are a band that focusses on a lot of details and likes to have everything "real" made by "real" people. That's why we go for a video that was shot in the middle of November, in a real swamp with real prosthetics and costumes; as well as real hand painted cover art by Andreas Marschall and so on. Also, the music is all about real drumming and real people playing real instruments.

Nils Weise contributes keyboards and helped in co-writing the music to the instrumental "In Grief And Chains"; yet he doesn't appear to be listed as an official member?

No, he is our former keyboard player, and not in the band anymore. We are still very good friends though and he helps out here and there. He basically left before 'To The End', simply because Orden Ogan just started to take too much time up, but I am very happy that we are still friends with our ex-members.

What are Orden Ogan's ambitions for 2015?

Well, we are on the HammerFall tour now of course, then we will play some festivals in summer: Bang Your Head, Rock Harz, Rockstad Falun (Sabaton Open Air), the Romanian Rock Meeting with Blind Guardian and so on; then there will be another European Tour with Powerwolf in the autumn. It's very likely as well that we will go on a headline tour in early 2016, maybe along with a live DVD release….

With their relentless touring schedule Atlanta quintet Blackberry Smoke already have a reputation as one of the hottest live acts around. Their previous two albums, 'The Whippoorwill' and 'Leave A Scar: Live In North Carolina' both crashed into the UK Top 40 charts and now the release of their excellent new album 'Holding All The Roses' will surely push the band, consisting of Charlie Starr (vocals, guitar), Paul Jackson (guitar), Richard Turner (bass), Brit Turner (drums) and Brandon Still (keyboards), even further into the mainstream. Ant Heeks had a chat with Brit Turner to find out more.

You incorporate so many different styles into your music, so how would you describe your sound?

Without the cliché, I would describe it Southern Rock And Roll music, because to me it definitely has a Southern feel to it. It's hard because we do love so many different types of music, we love the hallowed harmonies of old Country music and the instrumentation but we also love that about Rock and Roll.

You must be really pleased with the new album.

It's the record we wanted to make since day one, sonically. We've always wanted to work with Brendan O'Brien; he's expensive, he's a wanted man but we always knew he got what we were doing and we finally got in a position to be able to use him. From day one in the studio we never had to even discuss sounds with him, we just clicked, you know? And it came out great as far as I'm concerned.

Well I really think that 'Holding All The Roses' is the album that will turn Blackberry Smoke into Global megastars, are you all ready to make the next step-up?

Yeah, I've made all the room necessary in my bank account, it's completely empty and I'm ready for some income! No, we're ready, man, we know how to play and we know how to be gone for a long time. But obviously we need your help, so here we are! It's the best feeling in the world for somebody else to like your album, we already like it, it's like having kids, you know? If you have a kid, you're gonna love your kid, but when other people do then it's an even bigger pay-off!

So what is the meaning of the term 'Holding All The Roses' and why did you think it was fitting for your album title?

There's so many things that we run into where we discuss who's number one on the radio format or who won this television show, a band or a vocalist on a contest, what does it to mean to win? Charlie came up with the name and we just discussed it, how all these people win things on TV and they're number one at this or that, and it's like what exactly did you win? There are certain groups that are satisfied at that, but is that how it's supposed to be done, what exactly do you get for winning? Just thinking too deeply!

How do you manage to record your albums in a very short space of time?

I don't think we know how to do it any other way. I think if we were left to record an album over three months we'd do it in a week anyway, because with the songs we don't wanna record anything that we couldn't reproduce live, we just lay down what we lay down. The songs are three or four minutes long so if we don't get them right the first time we can just knock them out a second time. It shouldn't take that long to make a record, you know? The last record we did in four or five days and this one we took eight, and that was being lazy, I thought! (laughs)

Does Charlie reveal the thought processes behind his lyrics to the rest of the band?

Sometimes, but sometime we already know because we're together so much. Most things aren't secrets when you're around each other two hundred and fifty days of the year, we can usually guess and be pretty accurate. But sometimes you don't wanna put the person's name in there or the exact situation because that might be too personal, but a lot of times you can tell. They're from personal experiences growing up to current experiences. 'Let Me Help You (Find The Door)' is pretty obviously about the state of the music business, especially in America. There are lyrics that touch on what we see in the music business and what we don't like, sometimes it gets on your mind and you write a song about it. Other than that, most of the music and lyrics we record are from personal experiences, true stories.

The interviews on the 'Leave A Scar' DVD explained that you are all very strong family men, so I think it's great that Charlie is capable of writing so many bitter relationship break-up songs!

Well we're not twenty years old any more, we've been through a lot which makes you appreciate family. Some of us had to try marriage a couple of times before we got it right, and out of those hard times, sometimes you gotta write a song about it. Charlie and a couple of the other guys in the band have definitely had other marriages before so we have a lot of material when it comes to that! Now, we travel so much and devote so much time to the music I feel that we've all found somebody to help support us mentally, so we've all landed on good families at this point.

Why do you give yourselves such a punishing touring schedule?

Because it's really the only thing we can control in the music business. If we tried to do it traditionally where you record an album, plan a tour here, here and here and you're really depending on your record label PR and publicists to really get the word out and get on the radio, it may not happen. So the only thing that we can control, the only way that we've ever found that we can be heard, is to play in front of as many people as we can. It just makes sense to us, we've been involved and friends have been involved in record deals that go bad and they never really had the chance to play their great music to people, and we didn't wanna miss that. There's not a lot of guarantees in the music business so you get the word out. Actually the internet has helped a lot, we felt if we communicated with people and toured we could build it. It's taken a while but it seems like it's worked so we'll continue to do it. We know we'll need time off after two hundred shows and we take it, then by the time we're ready to go back, we're ready to play. We just enjoy playing that much. And it pays off.

Issa

Issa is a Melodic Rock vocalist who should require no real introduction to the Fireworks faithful. Her first album 'Sign Of Angels' came out in 2010 and she has released a further two albums ('The Storm' and 'Can't Stop') in the years since. 2015 sees her release her latest album 'Crossfire' and Dave Scott sat down for a catch up with the Norwegian songstress.

Your new album is due out soon, how does the finished article compare to the original ideas you had when you started work on it back in 2013; has it evolved much?

Yes certainly, I mean you always put your own stamp on things as you go along and you change things as well when you start to produce the songs. Some of these songs and the ideas for them were written about five years ago and you obviously change them with time. Some are a little bit different but then again some of the songs will sound more or less the same. On some we rearranged the keys and we did some other different things as we went along. The whole feel of the album is a probably a little bit more synth-based than what we original started off with.

I have read in the promo material that you already had a bunch of songs when you started, did they all make the final cut or did you have some that you didn't use?

That's the thing, because I have worked with Tom and James Martin for so long, we write songs all the time; some songs go on other albums, some songs we just keep hold of and some songs we thought... like 'Raintown' for example... was one of those songs that we considered was such a good song we wanted someone really special to do it. We never really considered that I was going to do that song but when we came to do this album we thought "why not, we will use this song". So basically we always have a bunch of songs and when we started we kind of dipped into the back catalogue and picked out some that we thought were great. Some of them that we originally thought were fine for this album have been taken out so yes there are some that didn't make it. I think because we have all the demos, it wasn't that hard to pick stuff out and we just went through and picked the ones we thought worked best.

You just touched on this already, what is the feeling and sound of the new album and how does it compare to your previous releases?

This album is probably a little bit softer and it is definitely a bit more synth-based. I know my second album was quite synth-based but I would say this one is even more in that direction. It is probably a little more... not Poppy... but softer than the others. It is very melodic with big choruses and the songs have that little bit more of that typical Tom and James Martin sound over them. The songs are a certainly a little bit different to those that have appeared on previous albums. We spent ages on this album because we worked with John Greatwood and he is a busy guy. It took a lot longer than what we originally thought but it gave us a lot of time to go over the songs and see if there was something we wanted to change or if we wanted to do this or do that. It was a little bit of a win-win situation to be fair.

What ideas and themes are behind the album lyrically and are there any that are particularly special to you?

Oh yes for sure... 'Only You' is a very special song. If you listen to the lyrics of this song it was something that James Martin wrote to me in the beginning of our relationship. That song is a little bit special and back then he had a friend that did the singing and it sounded great so that one was a given and it has always been a very special song to me. In general, the majority of the songs have a happy feel although 'Long Time Coming' is a little bit darker in the lyrics. But songs like 'Heartbeat' are definitely in the category similar to the likes of Heart and Belinda Carlisle and have that type of feel to them and to the lyrics as well.

The Martin brothers and you have worked together for five years now, I am interested to ask has anything changed or does it feel different to be working with James Martin given he's now your husband?

Oh god yeah... in the beginning we very nice to each other... that's the truth! As you go along the good thing is that you can be so much more honest. If you think something is sounding shit you can just say "it sounds shit" or "I don't like the song" whereas maybe in the beginning things were a bit more polite and you might not be as honest as now. That has certainly changed. I think it is nice to be able to write songs at home and sit and work on things and not really be that stressed out. The whole song-writing side of music is a lot more pleasant now than it has been in the past. Back then you might just get them from the record company and you just do them and you don't really know the story about the song.

There are a number of high class and respected guests that contributed to your album; Alessandro Del Vecchio (Hardline), Steve Newman (Newman), Robert Sall (Work Of Art), Pete Newdeck (In Faith/ Tainted Nation) and Michael Kew (Vega) to name a few. Was it hard work getting them all on board?

Oh you have no idea... ha-ha... only joking! The good thing is when it comes to all the guest musicians, they are basically all people that I have worked with on my previous albums. I know them quite well and that is why I felt comfortable asking them if they wanted to do a bit on the album. There is obviously not a lot of money in it for them so it is a great way to bounce off each other. If they want a favour from me in the future I will happily do that or if they want me to sing a demo for them I obviously will. That was the easy part; it was just great because we knew all these guys were great people to work with and great people in general. All those solos and the musicianship was fairly easy, everybody was great and came up with their own bit; even though we had the initial idea, most of them added their own stamp to it which was really great.

So how does it work with all the guests in terms of a process?

Usually we send them the song in the form of a demo. We are pretty fair people and we know they are all so talented in their own way. So we would say "this is the song and the solo (or this and that part) is going to go between here and there, just do what you feel is natural for you". Sometimes it will come back and we might take this small part out and put something else in there but almost all the time, it came back and was just great. It's not always fun to do everything by the book, you get a solo and you put your name on it but you literally just played it like somebody else has written or played it. So it is nice for the guys to be able to be a bit free. We generally ask if they could end on this or that note for example as it is going into something else; just simple little parameters like that. They did a great job... all of them so I am really happy.

There is one song I know you were most excited about and that is 'Raintown' which is a wonderful duet with Steve Overland. How did you get hold of him and get him to agree to take part in the song? Was it easy?

No it wasn't... ha-ha... no I am just joking again! The whole thing about this album was that we did it very differently. Normally we would agree upfront with Frontiers what we are going to do and what kind of songs we would be doing. But this album we kind of just started without even talking to them and what we decided was basically to use the time to do what we wanted to do before they got in touch with me. Just do it and then present it to them and say "hope you like it" which is a bit backward. But I kind of wanted to do "my own thing" so because of that, I didn't go to anybody at the label and try to get his email or anything like that. I actually got in touch with Steve Price at ARFM and asked if he had an email for Overland as we knew that they knew each other. He said he would ask him and he just came back and said "here is Overland's email... send him the song" and that he seemed very interested. Originally, we were thinking of doing 'Fight Fire With Rain' as a duet so it wasn't supposed to be 'Raintown'. I sent that song over to Overland and he came back and said he loved it and that it sounded great. But when I started to get the mixes back of '... Rain' and the mixes of 'Raintown' I was like "no... it has to be 'Raintown' that has to be the duet". So I had to go back again and say "I have changed my mind and what do you think about this one instead"? He said great and agreed to do it. I obviously had to re-do and re-work 'Raintown' and make it into a duet rather than a solo song. I did that and sent it off to him and he loved it and he recorded the song. It sounds great and I am really happy with it.

Aside from all the guests, who were the musicians who played on the album in a general sense?

Well, it was a bit of a family project really. We have James Martin on keys, Tom Martin did bass and some guitar and then obviously we had all the guest musicians who did all their other bits. We also had Michael Cruise who is a session drummer from London and we were put in touch with him through Greatwood; we just didn't know who was going to play drums and he stepped up and did that. Lastly we have Greatwood himself, who together with James Martin has produced the album.

What made you turn to Greatwood and how did he contribute to album's sound alongside James Martin's work?

When we first started to plan this album, obviously we thought who do we know that we have worked with that can get the kind of sound that we want to have. For me it was very important that my vocals come across in a certain way; people have different views and sometimes you suddenly sound like someone else. That was why we got in touch with Greatwood because we knew him well and we knew he does a great job because he produced Vega. So that is why we picked him; he does make a great vocal and because we spent such a long time on it all, he has managed to get the kind of sound that I like. When you do these albums they go so quick and sometimes things (and mixes) come back and sometimes you think "oh that isn't how I wanted to sound" whereas on this one we got the chance to get what we wanted.

Are you planning any sort of U.K. tour to promote the album?

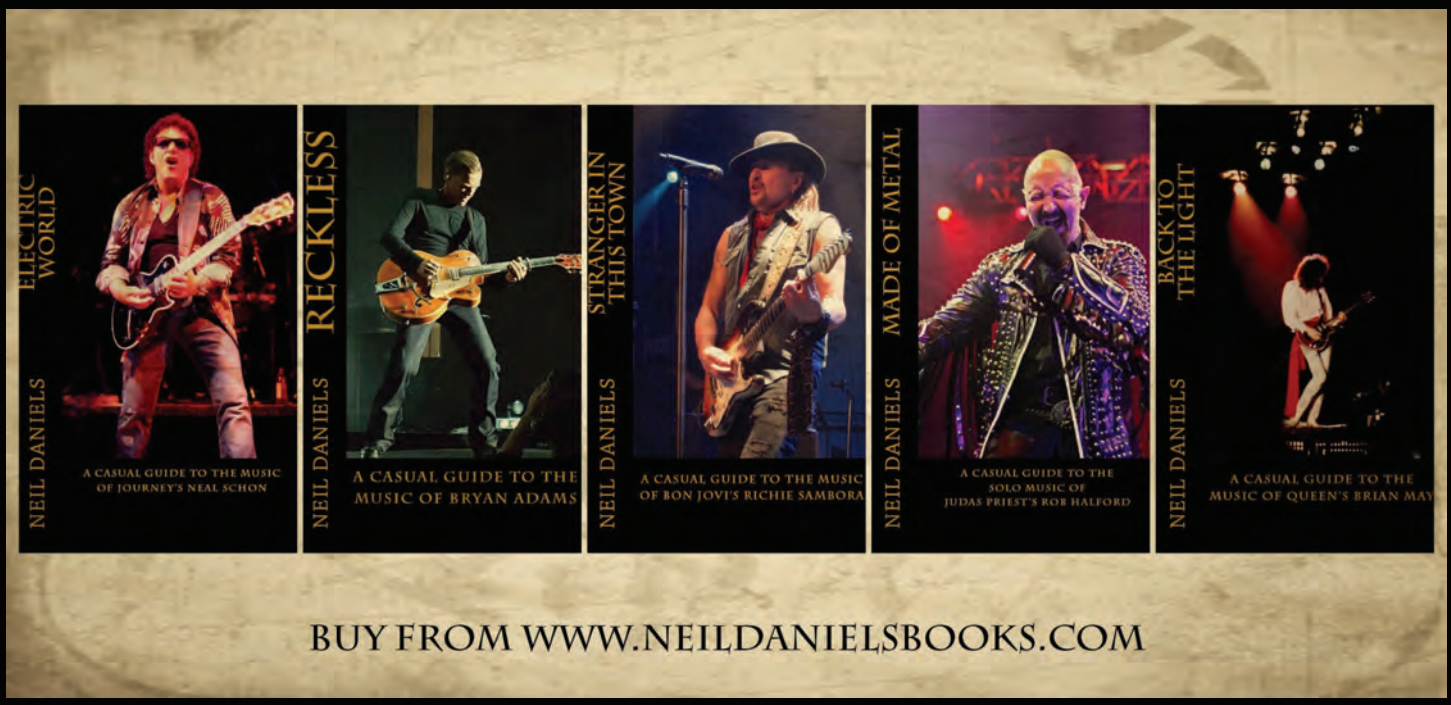
Yes I am. I feel it is the right time now and we are planning a three date tour. James Martin is kind of sorting it out and we are talking about who might be the support band and how we are going to do it. That is on the cards... we are going to do these three dates. That is in addition to the fundraising gig that is coming up which will be the first gig with the U.K. band.

Speaking of that... who backed you up at the ARFM Just Say Yes fundraiser?

It is Rob Wylde on bass, Dave Winkler (Bordello Rose) on guitar and his drummer Kamil J. Krol and then of course James Martin on keys. It is also a good little try to see if this band works great together and if it does, I will ask these guys to do more gigs and hopefully the three dates.

When are you thinking of doing these three solo dates?

It will be after the release so I am thinking maybe May or June possibly. At the moment we are thinking one date in London, one date in Manchester and… one date somewhere else! James Martin knows a bit more about which venues we are going to use and stuff like that; I have left it up to him but I think that is the plan. I can't wait... its going to be exciting.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LAST AUTUMN'S DREAM

Mikael Erlandsson could be described as one of the unsung vocal heroes of Swedish AOR. In a career that has seen him work with Martin Kronlund, Tommy Denander, Claes Andreasson (Heartbreak Radio) and many more, he has been at the fore-front of the Swedish drive for AOR perfection; but it is to his closest band, Last Autumn's Dream, that this interview turns; just as the band is set to release its eleventh album 'Level Eleven', through AOR Heaven. Wolf Gant asked the questions.

You have recorded four solo albums, written for and with many artists who have gone on to be household names to AOR followers around the world – you were a huge part of the band Secret Service since 2006 for example…. but, surely Last Autumn's Dream lies closest to your heart?

That's very true. L.A.D is really close to my heart just because I've written all the songs on this latest album and on many of the albums we've done together. But, on the other hand, I'm always up to new stuff and writing new songs, so there's plenty going on. L.A.D. is my baby, but right now I am working on my next solo album, and it's a little bit different in style from L.A.D. I play nearly all the instruments and am also the producer. I have to say, my heart is really where my songs are.

Now, you've obviously had the influence of Andy Malecek (Fair Warning) in the band's sound since its inception – in fact it was almost certainly because of Andy that the band came into being. It must have been a huge blow when he announced his departure last year?

There is only one Andy, and we were very sad to see his health problems getting progressively worse last year. Let's just say; he is only taking time off a couple of albums for us. He will always have his place in L.A.D.

You brought in Peter Soderstrom of course, but Fireworks readers might not be aware that Peter was no stranger to L.A.D.?

Yes. Peter was involved from the album 'A Touch Of Heaven' (2010) as a rhythm guitar player, so he was the perfect choice for this. On the previous albums to that, Marcel Jacob did all the rhythm guitars, and Andy only recorded his solo parts. But on this album it was just Peter.

Is there still a huge influence from material written with Andy, or did you start a-fresh?

Well, it's really no different from all the albums we've done actually, there's no track written with Andy at all. All songs start in my studio, and we leave a couple of bars for solo stuff in every song as we've done album on album. Sometimes Jamie (Borger, drums) and I have ideas as to how the solo parts should be played, so we used to bring these to Andy and he'd put his take on them… Now, Peter is much more involved, but the process was still the same when we started each song.

The influences to this album are basically my life and what I see every day. Of course you can hear a little bit of classical music on the production, and a little flirt with ELO…. But, as this album was already written in early 2013, and Andy was sick, he was not able to do any recording.

L.A.D. has had its share of tragedy, your bass player Marcel sadly passed away in 2009. Did you ever think that was the time to wrap up the band's career?

No. L.A.D. is tragedy sadly. We are a hell of a live band with thousands of songs, but no gigs at all. That's a tragedy. We are still in a state of shock at Marcel's death.

The one thing that really helped us then was that Nalley (Pahlsson) came and rescued us with blessings from Marcel. Marcel had a huge respect for Nalley, so we just decided to keep on and see what the future held.

How much of the music around now illustrates that period…. I'm thinking of tracks like 'Losing You' and tremendous song 'Follow Your Heart'…?

That's true. I think I will always have that period in the back of my mind when I do music for L.A.D. Luckily I have my co-writer Mr Claes Andreasson, who understands my music and intentions. The songs are like meditation for me and help a lot when I'm down. Hopefully that applies to others too. Every song says a lot to me in different ways.

You always seem to keep the same production team on-hand for L.A.D. (XTC Studios and Ulf Wahlberg). How important has that been to the band's career?

All the pre-production for all the songs are done by me in my own studio, only the drums and final mix are done at XTC… But, having said that, the spirit, happiness and fun we all have with Ulf is so important. He's like a full-time member. Things just happen at XTC. I think it's something in the walls that "haunts" us if you like? It's just a great atmosphere. It feels like home.

The market in Sweden and around the world is very different from when L.A.D. was first conceived. Is it more difficult to be heard now given that Swedish Hard Rock has so many very strong protagonists out there?

These days are hard times for all the millions of bands out there, but we just count our blessings that we are part of this. There are so, so many brilliant musicians and bands/projects who are doing exactly what we are doing; there's no particular difference from band to band; there's great songs, great playing and many cool styles out there. But I can truly say that we are blessed for doing what we are now doing. We can't move mountains or change the world, and I am happy with that, but it would have been nice, and still is a dream of mine, to come out and play a couple of songs sometimes.

And finally, where do you see L.A.D. going from here… Surely, there's more chapters to the story still to be written, right?

Oh, absolutely. We are still really at the beginning with this. The main thing for us right now is to go out and get some live gigs; whilst in the meantime still writing more stuff!

'Level Eleven' is out on AOR Heaven in the UK on February 23rd.

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Jorn Lande is back, joining forces with guitarist Trond Holter (formerly Teeny of Wig Wam) again for a brand new project. The newest addition to the rich catalogues of both is 'Dracula: Swing Of Death', placed somewhere between a concept album and a Rock Opera and drawing much from Bram Stoker's classic about the most recognisable vampire of all-time. Alexandra Mrozowska catches up the mastermind behind the project, Trond Holter, to discuss music, literature and horror films...

The first Jorn album you played on was 2013's 'Traveller'. How did you hook up with Jorn Lande and what's the experience been like working with him?

I hooked up with Jorn in 2011, when they asked me to help out on a South American tour. I did the tour and some other gigs in Norway but I was obligated for a new Wig Wam album and didn't hook up again until 2013. Jorn and I have a great time working together.

What do you think you brought into Jorn's band and how do you think it is reflected in the current music of the band?

I am very much a songwriter and composer, so that's what I bring in any band. On the 'Traveller' album I didn't get much time to write really.

'Dracula: Swing Of Death' is the title of a new collaborative effort of yours, not as much of a regular Jorn release as a Rock Opera/concept album based on vampire tales. How did you come up with such an idea?

I was in Romania back in 2008 when I got the idea. On a Transylvania trip it came over me that these new songs I'm writing fit this Dracula story. I love that story and there I was, soaking up that atmosphere. It was a great experience.

Your lyrical inspirations for the album being pretty obvious, what inspired its musical content?

These songs kind of sums up everything I love about music, wrapped in one album. I grew up with Alice Cooper's 'Welcome To My Nightmare' and Pink Floyd's 'The Wall', so that influence is strong. Still, the theatrical aspect never takes over the songs.

Were you personally interested in gothic/vampire stories, or perhaps horror films, prior to this album?

Not more than most people, it was more the dramatics for the music that hooked me but I love a good horror movie! (laughs)

Please tell us something about the musicians you and Jorn worked with during the making of the album.

Per Morten Bergseth is a really exciting drummer who is much more Prog Metal influenced. Bernt Jansen is the rock I lean on and we still like to keep together. Great guys. Lena Fløitmoen Børresen, brings the contrast to the rest of us and makes it all exciting, I think – she is very talented!

What was the songwriting process for the album like?

I started writing in 2008, then on-and-off throughout the following years. I later presented it to Jorn and we fulfilled it together. We work like most people do. Jorn shows up in my studio "at the crack of noon" and we are busy there until six o'clock, four days a week.

Do you think songs from this album can be treated as separate entities – differently from a usual approach to the concept albums – and therefore, are you able to pick any personal highlights?

Of course. Highlights are changing but right now 'Masquerade Ball' is my personal favourite. On the other hand, tracks that I also love are 'Walking On Water', 'Save Me', 'Swing Of Death', 'Queen of the Dead'... Hell, I love all of them!

Plans are being made to stage 'Dracula' as Rock Opera in Norwegian theatres. What are your expectations, are you excited about this concept?

We are planning it right now, and it's a bigger risk than usual with bigger production, so it's a bit scary too.

Many, myself included, got to know you first as Teeny from Wig Wam. Almost a year after the group disbanded, what are your thoughts about it? Do you try to erase your musical past and move on?

Good question. I'm not trying to erase my past, because I'm a person that is all music and nothing else... I don't think image. So, when it comes to Wig Wam, I am certainly proud of what we've achieved but I found out that with Glam Rock, people were more into what you were wearing than the music you played. I am a musician and that will always be the most important thing for me. And I had this monster called 'Swing of Death' growing inside of me….so I had to let it go.

What are the most important, or your favourite, albums from your discography prior to Jorn?

This album is by far the best thing I've ever done. But other favourites are Dream Police's first album released in 1990, 'In My Dreams' which we released as Wig Wam and the Baby Snakes album.

What does the future hold in store for Jorn and you? What about your other project such as Baby Snakes?

Sometimes one project takes more space than the other. Right now 'Swing of Death' takes all of both Jorn's and my time. So we have to ride this horse right now. Baby Snakes will pick up the torch later for sure.

Blind Guardian

It's taken Germany's Melodic Power Metal giants Blind Guardian almost twenty-years to come back to a story they started in 1995. Ian Johnson talks with the band's vocalist and visionary Hansi Kürsch about the reasons of returning to a tale two decades old, their use of orchestras and choirs and if they can tour with the project.

'Beyond The Red Mirror' is a continuation of a story started on 'Imaginations From The Other Side' which came out in 1995. The songs 'Bright Eyes' and 'And The Story Ends' are where the concept began. Why then continue it some twenty-years later?

The basic reason was that whilst I was writing the new album, I felt that I'd come up with a dystopian story that fitted in with those two early songs. The new ones I was writing had a classical feel to them which fitted perfectly with the older ones but they needed an orchestra to round them off, give them that big sound. I also always felt that we'd left the boy from those songs in a precarious position. He never actually finishes what he starts on the songs, he ends up standing in front of the mirror and is about to jump through when the songs/story end. In my mind he never makes that jump, so I thought to myself that I should finish the tale. I had many options as to what happened next and what the new universes that are on the new album were all about. So I sketched out two different worlds, one beautiful, the other full of decay and from there I needed the music I was writing to link in with the grandiose subject matter, and of course those two early songs of ours. So that's when the orchestra and choirs came into my mind. I wanted the new songs to be as intense and as overblown sounding as we could possibly make them.

The new album deals with classic Sci-Fi/ Fantasy themes but there are also a lot of real world ideas and subjects in the lyrics.

It's a technique I try to use when I write. I do a lot of research on my subject matter before I write a song. I'd been reading about two of my favourite authors, Tolkien and CS Lewis, who had an argument about how you go about creating a fantasy world. Tolkien said the story had to be a logical one based in a world designed to be as real as possible. Lewis said it had to be a fantastical world and didn't have to be logical at all. Because of this I tried to use both of these ideas in my lyrics, whilst still keeping the real world and it's issues in mind. I love to have as many themes running through my songs as I can. That said, the music is still the most important thing about Blind Guardian and it took us to nearly the end of recording the new album before we nailed down the songs and their running order because we were tweaking things here and there, trying to get everything just right.

Would you then ever consider writing a book based on the 'Red Mirror' story?

I actually have started to do just that. Firstly I wrote the liner notes for the CD booklet but I know that not everyone reads that, so on our website I have also written a diary about the story. At home I have a storyboard that works out where the 'Red Mirror' tale is going and hopefully if I ever get the time I will try to sit down and maybe write the book. Then the hard work of trying to get it published will start.

On the new release you have three choirs and two symphony orchestras helping your music. Was this how you envisioned the album's music, like a classical music score?

It really depended on the songs. Some of them had to sound like this, with big orchestras sweeping in to join the band but on other songs we could keep it simple. We've always felt as a band that we have a connection to an orchestra and that Blind Guardian's music at times needs this grandiose sound to make ours songs work. Because this was a musical concept, the huge sound that a choir and orchestra gives you was needed. The choirs were used because I'm a big fan of classical symphonies that use them. I wanted about 200 people singing on the album but you can't get that many people together all at once so that's why we used three choirs. We then joined their parts up in the studio and I think you'll agree that when you hear them together it sounds amazing. Our producer Charlie Bauerfeind (Saxon, Hammerfall, Helloween) was great, he helped us with everything. He actually learnt how to conduct so that he could better understand how to make the band and orchestra work together. We also had two other conductors who love Heavy Metal working with us and their understanding of our music and how an orchestra works was invaluable.

With so many elements involved with the new recording, will touring be a problem?

Good question. If we had to tour now then I think it would be a big problem. An orchestra needs a stable environment to work in and their instruments have to be treated differently than ours. We'd also have to do the concert in a different kind of venue, not your usual concert hall but a proper theatre so the acoustics for the orchestra would work. We're actually working on doing this properly sometime in 2015 with the orchestra. We're working on choosing four or five venues to play in and then we'll be able to do the whole of 'Red Mirror' and do it right the way, the way we as a band envisioned it.

Would these concerts be filmed for a DVD then?

Oh definitely, We couldn't do the project without the DVD because the whole thing is so ambitious and time consuming that if we left it to just doing a few live dates and didn't recorded it, I think we would have made a really big mistake. We'd need to do the DVD to help pay for everything, so the answer is yes, there will be a DVD.

Will the next album be a straight-forward BG record or will you re-visit the world of the 'Red Mirror'?

That depends. This album came about so easily for me as a writer but it was also a lot of hard work for the band to put together. I know though that I'll return to the story sometime in the future but as you know it usually takes us as a band about four years to make a new album, so who knows what comes next? I just know we all love what we're doing as a band, and that is hopefully making great music for the fans.

SWEET & LYNCH
ONLY TO RISE

Interview with Michael Sweet by Phil Ashcroft

Not content with writing and producing a Stryper album and a solo album, writing a book and touring more extensively than at any time in the last twenty years, Michael Sweet has also co-written and produced the newly-released and well-received 'Only To Rise' for the supergroup that bears his and Dokken/Lynch Mob guitarist George Lynch's names. Sweet & Lynch (completed by White Lion/Megadeth/Black Label Society bassist James Lomenzo and Whitesnake/Foreigner/Billy Idol drummer Brian Tichy) is a record that should please fans of duo's previous work, but despite his full schedule, the singer and guitarist is showing no signs of slowing down.

"It has been busy, and a little overwhelming perhaps, but I guess all in a good way," says Sweet enthusiastically. "I've had a lot going on, so I basically just took a few days off for the Christmas holidays and then I'm going right back into a new Stryper album. I've been working on songs for the last three days and we have a few more weeks to go before we start pre-production. The guys come out here on January 21st and then we start recording the new album on February 1st."

It's no secret that Sweet & Lynch was another idea from Frontiers label boss Serafino Perugino, and whilst the label are usually adamant about the retro direction of their releases, it seems that once the collaboration was agreed there was no interference in the direction of the music.

"No, not really," shrugs Michael. "Serafino had contacted me about singing for a supergroup that he was putting together – that's what he called it. I made a few suggestions, to let me be a part of writing the album and also to be the producer, and once I started working on songs with George he started sending me guitar riff ideas. I just kind of ran from there with the lyrics and the melodies and the arrangements of the songs. I kinda directed George on what to send, I would call George and say "Give me a song that has kind of a Van Halen vibe!" or "give me a song that has that old Dokken vibe!" and he sent me 'Dying Rose', or "give me a song that's like Journey", and he sent me 'Rescue Me', things like that. I would call back and say "This is perfect", and then we'd finish the song. Serafino and the label didn't really have any say in terms of style or the type of music.

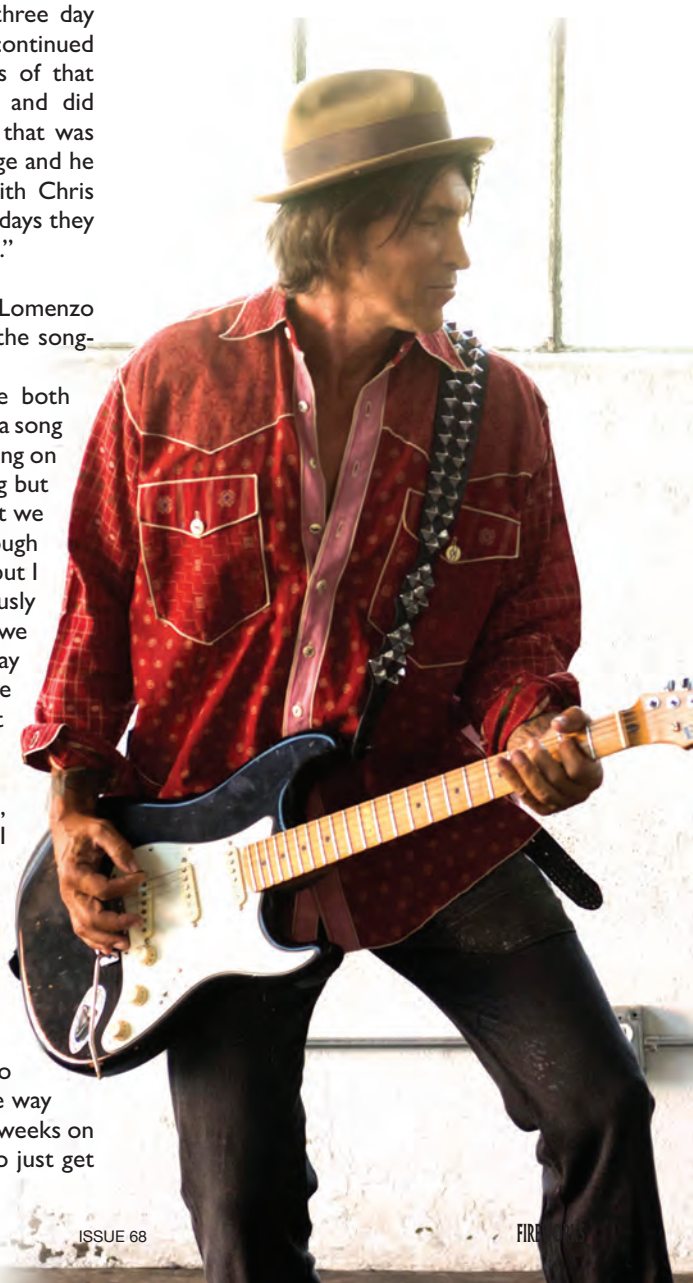
"It was a little different to how I usually work," states the singer. "Basically I went into the studio and mapped everything out, I recorded a click track and set the tempos, I recorded a keeper guitar for all the songs, and then a scratch vocal. Then James (Lomenzo - bass) and Brian (Tichy – drums) came out to the same studio, which is in Massachusetts – it's called Spirit House, I work out of Spirit House for everything, I'm very comfortable there and I love the people, especially the engineer Danny Bernini. So basically once everything was mapped out, they came in and listened to every song, took notes, then the two of them together would go into the room and track drums and bass. Once we'd got the drum keeper track James would come in and fix any notes that were bad on his end, it was about an hour or an hour and a half process per song. Once we got through all of them, which was about a three day period, they went home and I continued tracking guitars. After a few days of that I went home with rough mixes and did all my vocals at my studio. Once that was done everything got sent to George and he tracked his guitars out in L.A. with Chris Collier, his engineer, and after five days they sent us the tracks and we mixed it."

Time constraints prevented Lomenzo and Tichy from being involved in the song-writing process.

"I know Brian and James are both writers, and James actually sent me a song with the possibility in mind of it being on the album. It was a really cool song but it wasn't anything like the style that we were going after. It wasn't edgy enough and it just wouldn't have fitted in, but I explained that to him and he graciously accepted and understood, and we moved on. But no, they didn't play any part in the writing process, we just didn't have the time. It was just George sending me minute long guitar ideas and me turning them into songs with bridge sections, solo sections, lyrics, and so on. I definitely had my work cut out, I only had a couple of weeks to do it, which is the same situation as the Stryper album right now, and the same situation as the last Stryper album. I think I work really well under pressure, it's a necessary evil that drives me to work harder and focus, it's just the way I do things now. Only having a few weeks on a project gives you the pressure to just get the job done."

Given Lynch's frustrations from his time in Dokken and subsequent lead role in Lynch Mob and Tooth & Nail, I wondered if George was agreeable to just handing over his ideas to potentially have them changed into something he hadn't originally intended?

"Yeah, absolutely!" states Sweet without hesitation. "I think there was a mutual trust between the two of us. I knew what George was going to send me would be great, and I hope he knew what I would send him back would be great. Sure enough, when it was all done George and I spoke and he went on and on about how blown away he was and how incredible the songs were, and how it was great to hear them completed. So yeah, we trusted each other and it paid off. They were all brand new and I went song by song, the tricky part was that some of these songs have similarities to the past and bands we've been in. For instance, 'Dying Rose' has a little bit of a similarity, in my opinion, to the Dokken song 'The Hunter', just the vibe and the tempo, and the feel of it. So I made sure that I didn't copy anything melodically that would make people go "Oh my God! That sounds like 'The Hunter'!", it was a little tricky from time to time but we accomplished it. I couldn't be more



pleased with how things turned out, I'm still blown away with how the album came together, it really was one of those records that really could have so easily not been so good because of the way it was done. It could have been a thrown-together, B-level album, It would have been OK, I don't think it would have been terrible, but it turned out far beyond our expectations," states Michael with obvious pride.

After working with the Stryper guys for over thirty years as bandmate and now producer, Michael is adapting to giving direction to new people in the studio.

"It's both good and bad," he begins thoughtfully. "The good being that there are no expectations because you've never worked with them before. With the Stryper guys you go in and it's easy, you've done the pre-production and you have it all mapped out, and for the most part you know exactly what's going to happen. When you work with new musicians you don't, so it's a little unnerving. You know it's going to be great because you know they're great players, but you still don't know exactly what's going to happen until you go in and get that first song down, then you begin to get a sense of how it's going to sound. I've been a part of other projects where the first song hasn't gone so well, and you start to think 'Maybe this isn't going to be as cool as I thought!' With the Sweet & Lynch album it was amazing because Brian and James are just such great players, and with the level and calibre that they're at, you're just not going to get bad tracks. I think it's really how much understanding you have together and how much homework you've done, you can guide and direct those kind of guys to get in and do the job. If they don't have a producer giving them input then it could be a disaster, and like I said, I've been a part of projects like that and it isn't fun."

One of the interesting aspects of the album is that Sweet wrote all the lyrics, and whilst there are no Christian themes, he still works basically the same way as he does with Stryper.

"I always approach lyrics with the feeling that I have to believe what I'm singing, otherwise I don't want to sing it. If it's a song about doing drugs or worshipping the devil then I'm not going to sing it. I wanted to make sure they were lyrics that George was comfortable with. I think everybody knows by now that George is an Atheist/Free Thinker, and I'm a Christian, so we have polar-opposite beliefs, and yet we made an album together. I wanted to be respectful to George, I wasn't going to disrespect him by putting a song on there that spoke out against Atheism or sing 'Jesus saves!', because this is something we collaborated on and something we're both putting our names on. I wanted to make sure we were both comfortable without compromise, so I feel that I kept the lyrics I wrote real positive and enlightening, without compromising my faith or disrespecting George's faith.

"I'm always a little worried when I get a call to do an outside project because I have a deep, strong faith and I've been very outspoken about that for my entire life, so I have to make sure that the songs I'm going to be singing and the people I'm going to be working with are things I'm comfortable with, and that's always a big decision maker in what I do. I've turned down projects because of that. So why did I agree to work with George, with him being an Atheist and me being a Christian? It's because we're friends, I met George and did some shows with him, and although we don't share the same beliefs, we share the same sense of humour and the same love for music, we share the same background historically in terms of where we've been and what we've done, there are so many common links. I like George, he's a great guy and a good person, and I think he likes me, so I felt very comfortable saying 'yes' to working with him. I was actually the one who suggested it and made it happen. Serafino suggested I work with John Levin of Dokken among several other guitar players, but I suggested George and Serafino loved the idea, so I contacted George and he agreed to doing it and that was it. It was very quick and smooth, and effortless."

What the future holds for Sweet & Lynch is pretty up in the air, but both protagonists are keen to make more music together.

"I hope so!" says Sweet earnestly. "At the end of the day great music is great music, I love this style of music, I grew up on Bad Company and Van Halen and Journey and Foreigner and Styx, all these kinds of bands, and this album takes you back to that era. It's got an eighties vibe to it but it's also got a seventies vibe to it at times, it's a mixture of the two. That's what I grew up on and that's my favourite time and music, and I would venture to say that it's George's, James' and Brian's favourite times as well. I know Brian is a huge Kiss and Randy Rhoads fan. That was a very special time for Hard Rock and Metal, so George and I wanted to make an album to remind people 'Hey! This was the greatest music ever. Listen, check it out. Here's an album that reminds us of that!' That's what we were trying to accomplish with 'Only To Rise'."

The foursome's commitment to taking their music on the road seems to be hitting the same roadblocks as many such projects.

"We are planning to play some live shows but there's nothing confirmed as of yet. The tricky part, and what seems to be almost an impossibility, is the busy schedules that all four of us have," Michael sighs heavily. "James is touring with John Fogerty, Brian is constantly doing new things, George has Lynch Mob and Big Noise and he did the KXM album, and then there's me. I did the Boston run and Stryper have had their busiest time since the eighties, so it's really difficult to make everybody's schedules align. It's very tricky, but that being said, we're working on it and initially trying to put together a select twelve to eighteen shows, and we'll see how that goes."

With Stryper and Lynch Mob being veterans of the Monsters Of Rock Cruise, sailing from Miami and around the Bahamas, and Stryper already confirmed for 2015, that would have been an ideal platform to launch the band in the live arena.

"It would have been, and in fact we were offered," says Sweet surprisingly. "I spoke to George about it, we were given an offer to perform as Sweet & Lynch, but George wasn't interested in rehearsing for three or four days to just go and play one or two shows. He had some issues like that with Big Noise and he doesn't want to repeat that and go down that path, he wants to go out and do a run of three or four weeks in a row and keep our chops up. So we made a decision to pass on the offer, unfortunately!" says the obviously disappointed frontman. "But hopefully it'll happen sooner rather than later." Watch this space!

'Only To Rise' was released on January 26th by Frontiers Records.

CARE OF NIGHT

Sweden has put out more than its fair share of AOR bands. New Swedish AOR Sensations Care Of Night with their brand new album 'Connected' now join that illustrious line-up of Swedish Rock Royalty. Ian Johnson speaks with guitarist Jonathan Carlemar, about what makes Sweden so special when it come to AOR bands, epic songs and what comes next for this hard working band.

You're a new band on the Melodic Rock scene, so tell our readers a little bit about the bands history please.

Well we were actually formed from the ashes of an old Progressive Metal band called Seven Tears who had an album out on Frontiers records. I was about 16 or 17 when that band was put together and Kristofer von Wachenfeldt (CON keyboardist) later joined that band. We were very lucky to be singed by Frontiers, I was only about 18 when that happened and we put our album 'In Every Frozen Tear' out in 2007. After that, not much happened and we decided that we had to change our style, re-invent ourselves because we didn't really sell as a Prog band. We were all big Melodic Rock fans, so that's how Care Of Night came about. I called Kristofer and a couple of other guys I knew, asking if they wanted to form a new band, they said yes immediately and it just felt natural for us to write music in a more AOR way. So that's how CON came about.

In my review I mention that there must be something in the air or water in Sweden that makes it such a special place, one that seems to allow tons of great Melodic AOR bands to flourish. Why do you think Sweden seems to be able to do this?

(Laughs) I don't know really, we have a lot of great new and old bands like Work Of Art, Degreed, Alien, Europe and many more but what makes Sweden the place for all these great groups? Who knows? Sweden is a great place for music, everyone seems to want to play an instrument or make music, maybe it's the weather's fault! (laughs). It's cold here a lot of the time and Swedes stay indoors to keep warm. So there's not a lot to do and you end up picking up your Dad's old guitar or Grandad's piano's in the corner and you try to play them. So you learn to play during the cold months and then meet up with friends who have done the same thing and form bands in the summer. Maybe that's what it is about Sweden and Swedish musicians, the weather.

The songs 'Contact', 'Cassandra', 'Say A Prayer' and 'Unify' were first released on your debut EP. Have they been re-recorded?

No but of course we've improved the sound of them by production tweaks and having them mixed like the rest of the album. What we did do was use the same studio and same equipment, amps, instruments, same producers, same everything that we'd used on the EP to record the new songs. Sonically you won't hear any difference between the EP tracks and the album ones.

Were the other songs written at the same time as the ones on the EP or are they all new tracks written specifically for the new CD?

All the other songs are new ones written just for the new album. We'd had a great response to the EP you see, so the record company put a little pressure on us to follow it up as quickly as we could. So we got together and we worked hard and wrote the new songs for the album. I wrote some so did Kristofer and our drummer Linus Svensson helped with the writing. We did want to make the new songs fit in with the older ones and I think we've kept the sound we had on the EP.

Before we leave the songs I've got to ask you about 'Say You Will', it's not often that an AOR band records a seven and a half minute AOR epic. Tell us about it.

(Laughs) You're right Ian. It was my idea to do this song. I'm a huge fan of Mr Big and wanted a song on the album that was a bit like 'To Be With You' or Extreme's 'More Than Words'. So I wrote the song and when it should have finished at around the three and a half minute mark, we just kept on playing. I picked up my electric guitar and started riffing then the other guys joined in, when you listen to it, it could actually be called two songs in one. There's the acoustic beginning and the Hard Rock ending, it has a kind of Coldplay feel to it I think, especially the way it builds up from a softer start to a big ending. We all love the song and can't wait to be able to play it live.

You mentioned that you'd been on Frontiers for the Seven Tears album. Why go with AOR Heaven for the 'Connected' album?

Well we all felt that Frontiers, which is a great label to work for, was maybe a little too big for us. They have big acts like Journey, Toto, Mr Big, Foreigner and many more on their books and we felt that we'd probably get lost in the mix somewhere along the line. So it made sense to go with a smaller label. Let me say that Georg Siegl who runs the label and everyone at AOR Heaven has been wonderful to us and a joy to work with. They have great contacts in the business and have been really helpful to us.

Now to your secret weapon, singer Calle Schönberg. Where on earth has he been hiding?

I love it, that's the question we've been asked the most; where did Calle come from? Well what happened was that we had a different singer called Jens who didn't work out for us. So we started to look for another singer and our drummer Linus Svensson said he knew someone who he'd grown up with and gone to school with, who might be what we needed and that's how Calle came to be in CON. He's a great singer who blew us away from the very first note he sang for us. Over the years he has sung not just Rock but Jazz and a lot of Soul music. I think you can hear that Soul sound in his voice when he sings our songs. We're very lucky to have him in the band.

Finally Jonathan, what's next for Care Of Night?

Our goal is try to play our music to a live audience, try to do a small tour of our own or get on a tour as a support band. Maybe do some European festivals. As a relatively new band you have to understand though that it's hard to tour because it costs money but hopefully things will work out. Also we'd like to start writing some new songs as soon a we can, to keep the momentum going, then get in the studio and record them and just keep our heads down and keep on pushing forward. Hopefully as you said the press and fans seem to like what we're doing and if they keep on liking our music, we'll keep making it.

The onslaught of young Swedish bands seems to be never ending at the moment and one of the newest and most impressive is Reach. As the youth of Stockholm especially seem to be drawing on the Rock roots of their forefathers, Reach are bringing Melodic Rock to the next level. Drummer Marcus Johansson and vocalist Alex Waghorn told Sue Ashcroft a little about the band, the music that's shaped their style and their upcoming UK tour with Eclipse.

When asked how the band was formed Marcus says "I started Reach with Ludvig (Turner) about two years ago and then a couple of months after that we found Alex (Waghorn) through a website ad. The only thing we needed then was a bass player, so I contacted one of my oldest friends, David Jones, and then we had a full band". And what a good looking bunch they are. Not quite able to be full time musicians as yet, the band are all still working day jobs to make their dreams a reality. Marcus and Ludvig are also part of Adrenaline Rush, the band fronted by blonde beauty Tave Wanning, whose debut album was released through Frontiers last year and received great reviews. Marcus is eager to point out however "although Ludvig and I are in another band, Reach is definitely our main focus now".

Reach have currently released two videos and three singles – the latest of which is titled 'You Call My Name'. From listening to these, I was interested to know who their influences were.

"Mine are the likes of Edguy, Avantasia and Aerosmith," Alex says, "but I think Marcus has far more than me!" Marcus agrees.

"Yes, I think we all have quite different influences, but the common influences in the band are Classic Rock bands like Whitesnake, Deep Purple and Led Zeppelin – the older bands, but also many of the new Swedish bands like Eclipse, H.e.a.t and all those younger bands who are really good. So, there are a lot of influences, but the main thing we go for when we're writing is that we want to have big, catchy choruses and good guitar riffs with a fresh sound to it".

Having honed their style over the last two years, they are ready to unleash the band on a wider audience. Now, not to be disrespectful to Alex in any way, but one thing I was curious to know was why guitarist Ludvig Turner who was a finalist in 2014's Swedish Idol competition had decided not to be the singer in Reach. Having heard all his performances on the show and seen him sing backing vocals with Adrenaline Rush at last year's Frontiers Festival, I asked Marcus for his thoughts.

"Well, you'd probably have to ask him that, but I think he just wants to separate Reach from his own solo career. He wants to be the guitarist in Reach, but be a singer in his own right".

So, is there an album in the pipeline, or will they just keep releasing singles for now?

"We have already recorded our debut album," Alex tells me, "but we don't know when we're going to release it." That release will all be dependent on a label picking it up, which should hopefully prove to be an easier task than for a lot of upcoming bands, given the strength of their material. As Marcus says "We're in discussions with a label at the moment, so hopefully it will be released before our Sweden and UK tour in March".

Before Reach come to the UK to tour with Eclipse though, they have a few shows supporting Gus G in Sweden. I was interested to know how that came about.

"Our management got us those" Marcus beams. "This is our first real tour with Reach, we haven't done so many shows yet, so it's still all pretty new to us. It'll be fun to actually go out and play for a couple of weeks with other good bands!" And what a start – Gus G and Eclipse? Not bad for their CV! And what does the rest of 2015 have in store – festival appearances, more tours?

"Not yet," Marcus says, "but our management are looking to get us booked in to some of the Swedish summer festivals plus festivals in Finland and the UK, so we'll see how it turns out." Surely there will be several festivals who will snap them up.

I asked Marcus about the album.

"We have a good friend Erik Modin who is producing it for us – he plays drums in a band called Kerbera. He's helped us out with the recording and producing, but it's going to be mixed by Pontus Norgren from Hammerfall."

As I know Pontus very well, I mused that perhaps, if Reach get a spot at Sweden Rock, that Pontus would be on hand to do their sound as he will be there with Hammerfall…

Marcus chuckles: "Yeah, we'd already thought of that! But the album's going to be a real cool mix of Melodic Rock songs and some harder than others. We tried to step into a harder edge release than our single 'Black Lady', so it's more guitar driven and less keyboard driven. More drums, more guitars, but still very melodic with powerful choruses and all that".

I was interested to know, not so much about the influences on musical style, but who the guys listened to when they were growing up.

"My first one was when my dad played me the 'Worldwide Live' album by Scorpions. That had a huge effect on me – the show, the songs the performance of the band – it was so cool. That's when I knew that I wanted to play music" says Marcus. And what about Alex?

"Since I was about fifteen or sixteen really. When I was growing up, my father bought me a video of Michael Jackson, so I was always listening and watching him on TV. Then he bought me a Kiss album, but I guess I listened to a lot of Hammerfall and Talisman – I love Jeff Scott Soto." It seems obvious that the guys have great taste.

Alex sums up by saying "Well, we have this tour coming up and after that we hope to have some more shows, but what we really want to do is to get back in the studio and start writing again for the next record".

These young men are embarking on their Rock n Roll journey with so much enthusiasm and passion. Let's hope that the British public welcome them with open arms.

TOTO

Interview with Steve Lukather by Sue Ashcroft. Photo by Heather Porcaro.

By far, one of my favourite interviewees over the years has been perhaps the most prolific guitarist of his generation. Steve Lukather is a real character, a supremely talented player and songwriter and one of the most entertaining people I know. On the cusp of the upcoming Toto album release, I grabbed a chat with Steve to find out more about the band, the lineup changes and what the future holds for these stalwarts of the AOR/Prog crossover.

Your new album's coming out in March and you're back to a number for the title. Why have you done that?

It's our good luck charm man... it's like the sword's a good luck charm. You know we thought "Well, it is what it is". It is our fourteenth studio album; we are not counting like live albums, DVDs, compilations... all that stuff and shit like that because there are a million of those. This is a new, recorded, written for record. I think we counted a total of twenty because we had a lot of unreleased material on it (the list) so we stopped at that one... and we counted the covers record too because it was a record and we made the album... so we had fourteen and fourteen seems like a pretty strong number. It looked good with the mural, the sword so it seems to work pretty well for us. We thought "let's not fight it, let's embrace it" and that way there is no particular song or title that leads you down the path to think what kind of music it is because it is pretty diverse.

I thought it was just the fact that you were lazy and couldn't be arsed to think of a title?

We threw around a lot of things; we were ready to call the album 'Great Expectations' which is one of the songs but then you leave yourself wide open for some hateful criticism; "'Great Expectations'... well they didn't make that"! (laughs) Our third album was called 'Turn Back'; some reviewer wrote "'Turn Back', that's exactly what you should do after you have bought this record...go back to the store and give it back" (laughs). We do have a good sense of humour between each other but we don't want to make it that easy for everybody.

You really don't think you are going to get reviews like that? Of course you won't!

Oh it's not so much anymore but we did. I mean the other thing is the four... Toto and four is in there but it is the fourteenth so the Roman numeral looks cool. 'Toto IV' was one of our biggest records and certainly one that everybody goes back to when they refer to us so we embraced that... hey that's who we are. It's the same reason why we didn't have guests and try to be in "Current Mode" and have some Rapper or have a duet with so and so to try and bring the kids in. No, people want to hear a Toto record in the classic sense of the word to prove that old guys have still got some music left to make. That we are not all dried up and don't have any creative juices or fresh ideas; that was the point of this record.

It's been a long time coming though...

Ten years... since we started recording 'Falling In Between'... ten years ago...

Is that just because you have all been so busy doing other things?

Well you know, this band isn't... I left at the end of 2007 and we didn't reconvene until 2010 for Mike Porcaro and the intent was just to do a tour to help him with his medical bills and all that stuff because he was not doing very well. It's really not good right now; it's breaking my heart man. We spent the holidays together, Christmas and stuff and it was rough to see my brother down like that. So we helped him out and we had so much fun with Joseph Williams, me, Steve Porcaro and David Paich... everybody back on stage again, my high-school buddies, and so we said "let's do it again the next year". And then when we wanted to team up for the 35th anniversary and we wanted to do a live DVD and then everybody's after us saying "Oh, you owe us a record"' and all of a sudden the lawsuits started and all that shit and we were like "What"? So we tried to fight it because we didn't want to be forced to do anything but in the end the litigation was so expensive and crazy, our lawyers said "Look man, if you just make the fucking record you will actually make money, you're gonna have a new product and all this shit all goes away".

Let me tell you something, lawyers and litigation, you don't want to get into that shit... it's an endless money pit of bullshit and stress, lies, back stabbing and fucking awful shit. So we said "Okay, if we are going to do an album, we are going to make a fucking good one man, because there is a lot of expectations and there is a lot of things that we need to prove to ourselves... then let's make a personal best record and do the best Toto record we could make... let's not try to be anything that we are not and lets go for it... no rules... play to our strengths and not try to be something we're not". That is what we did and after ten months of blood, sweat and pain, this is what we gave birth to.

You have said to me before, like you have just said about it being your high school buddies, you said that this is more how you have always felt Toto should be... do you see it carrying on like that?

Well you know, like I said, we always intended to do just one tour and then all of a sudden we have this new resurgence of life; it's unbelievable what is happening to us right now. This interest and this buzz that we have got going on, the tour... even the last U.S. tour was our most successful tour in thirty years and we are going out this summer and it will be even bigger than the U.S. I mean in Europe, we have dates sold out six months in advance... big places with ten thousand people like Amsterdam... Ireland blew out in one day. In the U.K. everything is going to be sold out by the time we go there for the most part as far as I know... we haven't even done press as the album isn't out yet. That is based upon the Poland show being number one all over the world. People have been saying "these guys are playing really good now... maybe you should go and see them". We are proud and honoured and so grateful people are having another look at us without having the negative stigma attached from some smarmy-assed Rock critic who hated us from 1978. That is all gone; we have been embraced by the younger generation. We just spent the last two days with this EDM band What So Not and Scrillex and like all of a sudden these guys love our shit and we were like "really?" We worked with them and we wrote a song with them and all of a sudden all these good vibes are coming our way. Even the press ain't picking on us so much and we are actually getting good reviews... "Hey these guys ain't so bad after all... hey after almost forty years in, fuck we got to give them a little love for that if nothing else".

Surely you shouldn't feel like you have to prove yourselves at this stage?

We want to prove ourselves to ourselves! We want to raise the bar for ourselves and go "Can we do this... no that's not good enough... do it again... no that song's not good enough... no that lyric's not good enough... that vocal's not good enough... that mixing isn't good enough... that solo's not good enough". We spent ten months doing that, we beat ourselves up because we wanted to make something special... "Oh Steve, that solo... you have played that shit before... play something different... go somewhere else". When you have been playing with the same guys for forty years, they know every lick you've got so when you can surprise the guys in that room, then the audience out there is going to dig it.

Oh, I have to say you have some outstanding solos on the new album.

Ah thank you, I tried to play to my

strengths, which is the more melodic phrasing aspect of me rather than... I mean the speed wars are out of control... there are so many people that do it better than me; I just got lost in that from about eight years ago. There is still a couple of flashes, I can't help it... all guitar players like to do that shit but I really tried to be very careful with my choice of notes and phrasing; that is really where I spent my time.

And it does sound like a very "classic" Toto album.

Well thanks, that was what we were going for.

You have some other stuff going on before all that kicks off... you are going to Singapore with Larry Carlton?

I am, I am leaving in a few days and we start a tour of Asia and then Japan. We are going to do a live DVD and if it's good, people are sure going to see it. It is a great band... Keith Carlock, Larry's son Travis Carlton and the genius of Geoff Babko on keyboards and the two of us... who haven't played together in fifteen years, it's going to be a kick. I get paid to get lessons from Larry Carlton... it doesn't get much better than that! (laughs)

You had a couple of people on the album; you had Lenny Castro doing percussion...

Castro is coming on tour, we are so excited. We haven't had Castro out since the 80s man and David Hungate, our original bassist, is supposed to come on the road. Unfortunately Keith Carlock is going back to Steely Dan right now and we are going to have Shannon Forrest come back and he is killer, but Carlock is still part of the team. He just had seventeen years with fucking Steely Dan and all of sudden they want to work exactly at the same time as us! That's why there's four people on the cover instead of everybody; we tried to get everybody out for the photo shoot but nobody wanted to fly out.

When will you have to start doing rehearsals for this tour?

Well, I am going out with Carlton in a week and that's for three weeks, then I come home for four days then I go out with Ringo Starr for a month and then I come back and I have four weeks off and then we start rehearsals. Then the world tour starts at the end of April and it's going to go well into 2016. We start off in Europe for two months then come back and have a little time off... back in the U.S. for a month then we take a little time off again... then hit the likes of Japan, Asia, Australia... more U.S. and more Europe. It's a big promotion for this record you know, we are really putting everything we got into this and who knows what's going to happen. If this thing takes off... God knows. I like to go out and... this is great to have this new interest and this nice, positive buzz around us. A lot of people want to come and see us and the reaction to the new album has been incredibly positive. Here is a bunch of guys in their late fifties and were going "Is this for real... really... this is this so cool".

Well you know that I heard it before it had even been mastered because I went to the Frontiers sales conference thing that they did, so I got to hear it before it was even completely finished. I was sitting in that room with all these executives and people involved in the label and every single person said how fantastic it was. We listened to it all the way through...

Well everybody has invested a lot of time and money both sides of the fence so we want to make this a success, we want everybody to win regardless of any personal conflict that may be there or not be there. We all want the same result; we are working towards that goal.

There is a documentary that comes with it.

Yeah there is going to be a little bit of a "making of", when the EPK came out... and it's gotten a lot of great looks... there is a thirty minute "making of" version in there that you will see that's got a lot more stuff in it. It's on the 'Deluxe Edition'.

What sort of stuff is on it?

It's kind of like the EPK on steroids; there is more of all that. There is more of us talking about the songs, more interviews, live in the studio stuff and live shots. It's really fun and a really interesting piece. Basically, if it was a zoo you would be watching musicians work in their natural habitat! There's also us taking the piss out of each other as we are working.

No change there then?

The album XIV is sure to be one of the top releases of the year and I'm looking forward to the May tour with 'Great Expectations'……

SCORPIONS

Interview with KLAUS MEINE by CARL BUXTON

As Scorpions celebrate their 50th anniversary this year, Klaus Meine can truly lay claim to legendary status within the pantheon of Rock and Metal music. Calling him at home in Hannover, Klaus was immediately upbeat and chatty, and we got talking about our shared passion for football and discovering that we're both Hannover 96 fans, and how I'd travelled over to Hannover to see Scorpions perform in our home city at the TUI Arena in 2010 for what I believed at the time to be their farewell home performance.

Despite personal recent tragedies on the management front, Klaus was very candid and pragmatic about life and the future of Scorpions as well as being reflective of their achievements… and of course there was also the small matter of discussing the new album 'Return To Forever'.

"We're coming back to the UK in the summer – The Ramblin' Man Festival. We're very excited to come back. We haven't been in the UK for quite a while, and we're very much looking forward to playing for our British fans again."

As to whether there will be any more UK dates added, Klaus adds, "Chances are good you know, but I don't know right now. It's all piling up and looks like the first show we will do is in China, which we play early May - for the very first time we have a show in China - and then we go all over Europe. We go to the United States in the fall and so those dates are just piling up, and if we can squeeze more in, since the tour continues in 2015 with shows in Germany, then hopefully we can put in some more UK dates. We'll see, you know, but it's a beginning."

'Sting In The Tail' of course was meant to be Scorpions' swansong album and the World tour starting in 2010 was meant to be the long goodbye. There had been various press quotes from Klaus, Rudolph and Matthias subsequently reversing that decision, so I asked Klaus what exactly had happened in the Scorpions camp for them to change their original intention?

"I think in 2010 we all agreed it would be a good moment in time to face the final curtain at some point. But then we thought we needed to go out on the road for another two or three years, it seemed to be such a long time you know… but it wasn't. We were not thinking about making a new album, I thought that 'Sting In The Tail'… it's a great album, maybe a perfect album to finish the career. And then we realised there's still much more in the tank than we thought – much more passion and fun, and also the fact that we saw a whole new audience of Scorpions fans – young kids in front of the stage every night; playing in front of three generations. Wherever we were it was like 'Come on Scorpions, this can't be the end, when are you coming back, what's happening?'"

Klaus found much amusement in this before continuing.

"We were doing great on this tour and we thought, especially Rudolph and myself back then, we thought, come on, two or three more years. We're in the second half of our sixties, so it's maybe a good position you know (to retire). And then we realised that we still can do it, there's still a lot of passion and a lot of creativity. In 2011 and 2012 we thought about making something like another album, it would be like going back to the 80s - we always called it outtakes, songs that were never released and material that was never finished. There was some good stuff sitting there and so the whole thing was not so much about the fact we had to start writing songs again, but then after this farewell tour we had the offer from MTV in Berlin and it came around after the end of the farewell tour. And really we should have said it's a little late, unfortunately, we've just split up, you understand? When the offer came in then we focussed on MTV Unplugged and we wrote some new songs and so the flood gates were open again, and so at the end of the tour it was like, 'Okay, let's cut the massive touring down and do some projects, this and that, let's enjoy life.' We try to break out of this cycle that all these bands are in, having a new album, going out on the road, a new album… and it keeps going on forever, and we thought that this is it now, and maybe we were the only ones who really believed it. At the end it was more like let's take the foot from the gas and maybe we should play less shows and we should do it to have some fun. We don't wanna kill ourselves here, you know.

"To be honest, in the last couple of months, first our manager died in September - Peter Amend - which was a shock. He was a good friend of mine and a local promoter in Hannover who did the show you attended in Hannover at the TUI Arena, and now when the New Year started with the sad news that our long time tour manager (Michael) 'Commander' Gehrke left us as well. Yet we try to keep our heads up and do interviews one after the other but these events are very sad, it's like a shock. Two very close friends and people who have been with us for so many years. What we've learned and what we feel right now is it can be over tomorrow, you never know.

"The album's called 'Return To Forever'. Yes, it's like an open end but at the same time you really don't know, and when you think that we're a part of the generation of bands like Aerosmith, Motörhead, AC/DC, all these guys, Rock 'n' Roll is getting older and we feel very privileged that we are still here, that we're still out there, that we still can play this global stage and probably we'll do it for as long as we can, but not knowing what life will bring. What we feel right now is very sad that it can be all over very, very quickly, and it's just the way it is."

Klaus had related this with a very obvious sadness in his voice but at the same time determined that the Scorpions would carry on. I mentioned that their show in Berlin I attended back in 2010 was less than two weeks after Ronnie James Dio had passed away and Klaus had dedicated 'Send Me An Angel' to him, which had reduced me to tears due to the emotion of the occasion in the Arena that night.

"Yeah, I also miss Ronnie a lot," Klaus confirmed. "He was not only a great artist but also like a friend. Whenever we met it was so… ahh, we were so close. And I don't know if you had a chance to listen to that version we did on the tribute album (Rainbow's 'The Temple Of The King') but that was something we did with all our hearts. What I'm saying is, with all these bands, at some point there is an era that comes to an end. That's just the way it is. And we are very happy that we are still out there and we realise that to throw it all away it would have been the wrong decision but we didn't know that we would make a new album. When we picked up the pieces of this so-called outtakes project, where we went back to this 80s material, it was after last year, after we did the MTV Unplugged concerts here in Germany. Then we went back with our Swedish producers (Mikael 'Nord' Andersson and Martin Hansen) and in the meantime there were new songs and at the end of last year it turned out it was very much a new album, it was a mix of 80s songs and new stuff, much more of a new album than we ever thought we would come up with. We're happy about it, and we're excited and, yeah, we've put out almost twenty songs," he said laughing at the thought.

"At the end of last year we said, so guys, what do we do? Put out a double album or what?" Klaus chuckled at the very mention of this. "It was quite something in 2010 and saying this is our last album, and this is it. They put us back in the studio with this 'Comeblack' album (in 2011) and MTV was really something that turned the switch - writing some new songs, we really enjoyed that project and so when we went back to this outtakes project then we were back in writing mode. I think it turned out pretty good, and we realised there's still a lot of

energy in this band and, yeah…we are getting older, especially Rudolph and me, being 66 now, and of course Matthias, he will be 60 this year but he's younger, and not to talk about James and Pawel, for them the whole scenario calling it quits was like a nightmare you know – I didn't like doing it." Klaus jokingly laughed at the prospect of potentially leaving James and Pawel high and dry whilst he rode off into the sunset. Fortunately of course he hasn't had to make that decision yet as they've set no timeline for when they do eventually close that door on their career. I turned my attention therefore to what had been written during the song writing process.

There were nineteen songs, twelve made the standard album, sixteen the deluxe edition and three were discarded or put to one side. 'Rock My Car' and 'Hard Rockin' The Place' have that distinctive 80s feel. I request a breakdown of which songs are the old ones and which are the new ones, because Scorpions fans, myself included, are fascinated by this.

"So far nobody really can tell what is new and what is old, which is a good thing," Klaus begins optimistically. "But like the first single, 'We Built This House', it's a new song. 'Going Out With A Bang' is a new song, 'The Scratch' is a new song. 'House Of Cards' is an old song, 'Rock My Car' is old, 'Rock 'n' Roll Band' is an old song, 'Rolling Home' is a new song, 'Eye Of The Storm' is a song from the early zero years – end of the 90s – yeah, it's a good mix, it turned out to be a good mix and then on the deluxe version there's some extra bonus tracks. I think they're all brand new including 'Dancing With The Moonlight' which we also used on MTV Unplugged."

With three songs put to one side, the obvious question is are they ever going to see the light of day?

"I think one of them is a special bonus track for iTunes, one is a bonus track for Saturn Media (Germany's music chain emporium) and, I don't know, one for some other big chain like Amazon or something like that. Yeah, we didn't have too many songs," he says chuckling again. "We thought we would have so much left over but we didn't and the songs went like this. No problem."

My initial impression is that the album is very melancholic, and reflective in places, almost like a sad album, songs about your career and achievements, like 'We Built This House', and songs about wanting to finish because of the huge strains of touring and being away from home but with the call to go back on tour being so strong because you miss it, like 'Gypsy Life', 'Eye Of The Storm', even 'Rolling Home' or 'House Of Cards'. I ask if Klaus feels that this is probably the end of his recording career, the end of an era and some of the songs reflect that?"

"I think right now I'm too far away from it in making any promises and any predictions as it's in the future," the singer states rather cautiously. "Definitely we learned our lesson here you know. But I know what you're saying, what's coming out of those songs, it gives you that melancholic vibe, that this might be it. I know, yeah, I agree 100%. It's in there, it's in the lyric, it's the vibe, I can't help it. But still, at this point…no, it doesn't make sense. We called this album 'Return To Forever' because it's like an open end, and we don't know. It might be the last thing we ever do or who knows? I really don't know." Klaus emphasised this point by repeating the last line.

"All I know is that those Swedish producers Mikael and Martin, those guys, they gave us a new life since 2010, and that's for sure! We enjoy working with them so much, whenever we say come on guys we'll come to Stockholm, they say, 'No, no, no, we'll come to Germany.' They love to work here in our old studios and we split it up between Rudolph's place and my place, and we can work at the same time; they know totally the Scorpions DNA. They're so inspiring and they are great musicians, and it's so much fun to be with them and work with them. So, if they would call tomorrow and say, 'Come on guys, there are a few songs left, what do you think?' We would be there no problem!" Klaus laughed at this as clearly he has a lot of affection for them. "It's just the way it is but I really must give them the credit, they are great motivation and it's just a lot of fun to work with them. It's how this whole album came about. We didn't book a studio for three months and then we have to be finished, we recorded some songs, went out on the road, played some shows and then we recorded another song and this and that. It was building up like this over a long period of time and we were not really thinking about making an album."

'The Best Is Yet To Come', which was the last song on 'Sting In The Tail', makes me ask what the significance of that song was at the time, because it was only one of two songs that Klaus wasn't involved in the writing of and to me, being a Scorpions fan, the song seemed very strange in view of the announcement about finishing your career and it kind of left everything open as to what was going to happen. Klaus pondered this for a moment before replying.

"What we saw with 'The Best Is Yet To Come' and whenever we played that song live, and still play it, it also left a little bit of a chance for an open end. 'Gypsy Life' is a little more melancholic, being the last song on the album. When you listen to the bonuses, one of the songs is a ballad at the very end. It's called 'Who We Are' and in the

lyrics it says we are the sun and moon. It's a bit like when Rudolph, who's very much 'out there', he told me so many times, 'Klaus, as songwriters, you are the sun and I am the moon, you know?'" Klaus said, chuckling once more. "And I put that line in that song 'Who We Are', in a way it's a good picture that describes the chemistry between us as friends and song writers. There are a few songs I guess that you have to check out if you have the chance to listen to those bonus tracks, but I just want to say this may be also released in a way, more like an open end if you will. It's a very short song. The song is like two minutes or something, but it's a nice little statement and it's a nice vibe. Celebrating fifty years - not too many bands can do it. There are only a very few but how many bands can celebrate their fiftieth anniversary with a new album?"

Klaus, of course, is absolutely right in making that statement. I asked what could he tell me about the crown shaped cover and what were the concept and ideas behind it?

"Well, we were looking at different artwork and thinking about ideas and stuff and I'm not sure where this idea of the crown came up - like crowning the 50th anniversary. The thing is we had many ideas and I think Rudolph wanted to put a '50' on the album or something," he said, again finding it rather amusing, "and I thought 'No way! No way! No! No! No way!' So we had to find something more subtle to make a celebration of those fifty years. I think it was my idea to come up with the crown, this Rock n' Roll crown like Freddie used to put up on stage when he sang 'Bohemian Rhapsody', the Rock n' Roll crown you know. So I think that was the idea. We thought that would maybe be a good way to celebrate our fifty years. Using the crown as a symbol."

Before we finished, I really wanted to ask Klaus about Katja Von Garnier's documentary 'Forever And A Day' that would be coming out, when we could expect it and what would it include.

"The world premiere will be shown in Berlin on the 7th February. The movie channel is in Berlin and so it will be out there very soon and it will hit movie theatres in March. There will be another premiere in Hannover, in our home town, so you'll have a chance if you're interested. It's a movie about the life and career of the band, the story of the Scorpions, a documentary with lots and lots of unseen footage from the early days, some of it filmed by Uli Jon Roth with his Super 8 camera and we had the team with us around the world from Bangkok to London to Paris, L.A., Berlin… you know, a lot of places, even Lebanon, Beirut. It's turned out to be a pretty cool movie I think it will be a very special extra for our fans this year."

'Return To Forever' is released by Sony Music on February 20th.

Photo: Maria Kuczara

Agnieszka Świta

Agnieszka Świta has recently produced her first solo album, 'Sleepless', showcasing her voice and accompanied by Clive Nolan (Arena, Pendragon) on keyboards, Andy Faulkner (Twelfth Night, Jump) on bass, Steve Harris (Ark, Paul Menel Band) on guitars and drummer Dave Mackintosh (DragonForce). Rob McKenzie took the opportunity to speak to Agnieszka from her mother country, Poland.

Please tell me how your album came about with Clive Nolan's input.

In 2006, I started working with Clive to produce 'She' (the Rock Opera). We gelled immediately and have collaborated ever since, including three EPs, 'Journey's End (Acoustic Anthology)' and in 2014 'Alchemy' was released as a double CD and DVD.

Musically, we both bring something to the table. I had a lot of unused creative energy and so I decided to make a solo album; Clive was the natural choice as the keyboard player and producer. We invited people to work with me who were very supportive; our sound engineer Karl Groom and of course the musicians. Three years later, I now have the album out!

What are your musical influences?

My musical tastes are quite diverse, ranging from Classical music, Prog Rock to Metal. I am one of those people who finds a record and will listen to it for days on end. Obviously, working with Clive and other Progressive Rock musicians, I appreciate music that is complex and has a story to it.

What was your songwriting process for the album?

The first thing was creating the melody; as I am a singer. If I can't hum it, it is not worth pursuing. I then made the chords and built the structure around them using Pro Tools and a keyboard, laying down the basic tracks - drums, keyboards, basic guitars and bass. If I still liked the demo after a few days, the feeling of the song emerged and I completed the melody lines and wrote the lyrics. I then ran the songs past Clive and we talked about how they would work on the album. They were then passed on to the musicians who replaced the programmed tracks with real instruments, that is where the magic began. When the musicians added their own heart and soul to the parts, they were given free rein to add their creativity and think of the original demos as a starting point to build on. As a result, on 'Sleepless' you can expect melodic and hard hitting guitars, Power Metal inspired drums, elaborate keyboards and bombastic bass parts. I was very fortunate to collaborate with such brilliant musicians.

Tell me about the 'Cosmo' Trilogy on your album.

That set of songs was based on the idea - what if the Universe was shrinking and one of the planets needed to be destroyed? A researcher is sent to Earth to determine whether our values and world were worth saving. 'Code Of Humans' is written from the perspective of the alien, 'Disclosure' from the point of view of the humans and 'Asylum' from that of an independent superior being. The trilogy doesn't conclude with any decision; it is up to the listener to figure out the outcome. There are a lot of things happening in the world today which aren't right and it's always worth seeing if we can improve ourselves.

Your vocals stand out on the album with your range being particularly impressive.

It's handy to have a good range, but it's more about emotions and telling the story, not just the notes. When I was little, the first thing I said wasn't a sentence, it was a song. When my mother sang lullabies to me I started singing along with her! I was always the annoying kid on the bus who started singing as I had an audience!

The packaging of your album is top class which is nice to see in this digital age.

Thank you for noticing! Maria Kuczara did the artwork and photography; I was looking for someone to put the stories of my songs into pictures. We had two days of intense photo shoots in Krakov where she lives and she put the package together well. I was very pleased.

How has your album been received?

I get to hear people from around the world who have said how much they have enjoyed it. Reviews have been positive as well; I am very pleased, it being my first solo album. It's been amazing so far; I am doing live gigs later in 2015 which have come on the back of this so the future's looking bright!

The first gig will be an acoustic one on 19th March at the Borderline in London supporting Arena. I am looking forward to playing live with the musicians who were on the album - dependent on the type of gig. If the gigs are just acoustic it will be Steve Harris on guitar and Andy Faulkner on bass. Clive's availability will be based on when and where Arena is touring.

Further details on Agnieszka can be found at www.agnieszkaswita.com.

ANGRA

Four long years have passed since the Brazilian Power Metal monsters know as Angra released their last album. After a few band upheavals they have regrouped and recorded a brand new concept album called 'Secret Garden'. The subject matter on the new CD deals with religious and scientific dogma, love and loss and what, if anything, comes after Death. Ian Johnson talks with the band's singer Fabio Lione about the album, its deep concept and thought provoking themes.

It's been four years since the last studio album 'Aqua' was released. In the meantime you've put out a Best Of and a live anniversary album for the 'Angels Cry' album but was it always Angra's intention to make a new studio album?

Yes, definitely. The band as you know had a few troubles over the last few years, losing their singer and drummer, so after playing the 70,000 tons of Metal show, which was real fun for us and the fans were so great, we decided to do the anniversary tour for the 'Angels Cry' album which went really well again and we had lots of fun doing that. So when that tour finished and we went home, we talked and decided that the time was right for us to record a new album. We did though want this to be a different kind of album for us and we wanted everything about it to be just right, so we worked really hard to make this album as good as we could.

The album is a concept about love and loss, as well as religious and scientific beliefs, which are all very strong subjects. Who came up with the story?

The main person behind this is Raphael Bittencourt. What happened was that the whole band went away together for two weeks and we talked about what we were going to do and what we wanted to achieve on the new album and during this time we came up with about 70% of the music for the record. That was when Raphael came to me and told me about the concept he'd come up with for the songs. It was really interesting to me the ideas he'd come up with for the story and I liked this religion versus science thing a lot. We all think the concept of this album has a unique edge to it, mixing modern themes of atheism and science against a backdrop of religion. I think the fans will love what Raphael and the band have come up with on 'Secret Garden'.

Talking of the album's title Fabio, what is the 'Secret Garden'?

The Secret Garden is a metaphor for a place that can be found inside everyone. A place where we search for answers within ourselves, it's a path that we can all follow if we ask ourselves the right things. Questions about morals, religion, ethics, how we live with other people, how we treat them as human beings and how they treat us; it's a place that is hard to visit but gives you the answers to those very hard questions we all ask of ourselves from time to time.

The main character in the story is a scientist called Morton Vrolik, who after the death of his wife in an accident starts to question his atheist beliefs and ponders whether there is anything after death. With such strong subject matter did playing this part make you question your own beliefs?

Not really, no, and that's mainly because it's not only myself playing the part of the Doctor; at times during the album Raphael plays him. Then it's me again or I'm an Angel on another song or we have Simone Simons of Epica and Doro Pesch playing other characters in the story. So we all got to look at the questions Raphael asks in his story from different angles. I will say that the music and lyrics did make me think some things but they didn't change my own beliefs.

Talking of the guests, it seems as a band that you were not afraid to use other artists to portray the stories characters. Simone Simons is the Wife and actually gets to sing the title track by herself, then Doro has a duet where she and Raphael duet as the husband and wife, while at other times both ladies play angels. Was it always the bands intention to use a variety of singers to play the various parts, or did that come later?

No, that was always what we wanted. We kind of wanted a Rock Opera but not a Rock Opera, if you know what I mean, mixed with a normal Angra CD. Having the other guys in the band sing lead on some songs and using the talents of Doro and Simone has really fleshed out the album and we're really proud of how the whole thing came together. You need other voices to really get the most out of this kind of album. One singer just can't do it justice.

You cover the Police song 'Synchronicity II'. It fits in so well with the other songs on the album that you would swear that it is an Angra song.

Yeah, we gave it the Angra treatment didn't we? Actually it was my idea. We wanted a cover song and we looked at using a song by Toto and another by Journey but I was listening to the Police just before we made the new album and the first song I ever heard by them was 'Synchronicity II'. So as everyone was throwing ideas into the hat for a cover song, I suggested why don't we try this one, never thinking they would take me seriously. Their reaction really surprised me because they all thought it was a great idea and for whatever reason it fitted in with the other songs on the new album so well, that, as you know, it isn't at the end of the CD as a bonus track but right in the middle of the album and we think it works. I think the fans will enjoy it a lot because they won't expect a Police song on an Angra album (laughs), but a good song is a good song, so that's why it's there.

We've got to talk about the production of the album because it's amazing. Roy Z pre-produced it for you then Jens Bogren finished it off and it's one of the best sounding CD's I've heard in quite a long time. The band must be really pleased with it?

Thanks Ian, we really are very happy with the album. Roy Z was great to work with and Jens was a revelation. I'd never worked with him before but he really knows what he's doing. I was with him for a couple of weeks in Sweden doing my vocals and it was like I'd know him forever. The way he makes you feel in the studio, fully relaxed and calm, is fantastic and I'd done my vocals faster and better than I'd ever done them before. Just five days for the main vocals, then the rest of the time working on the vocal harmonies and melodies and helping the other guys in the band with their vocals. Roy Z is great as well because when you work with him he's full of ideas.

NEW RELEASES

IMPERA - EMPIRE OF SIN
ESM271 - Out 23rd January 2015

Featuring:
Matti Alfonzetti - Tommy Denander - J.K Impera - Mats Vassfjord
Special guest John Leven, lead guitar on "Thunder In Your Heart"

Impera are a melodic rock "supergroup" who's individual members need no introduction. After "Legacy of Life" (ESM244) and the follow up "Pieces of Eden" (ESM259) we excitedly await January and the new album "Empire of Sin". This time Impera turn on some real feisty hard rock with songs like "The Beast is Dead" and "Don't Stop". John Leven (Europe) makes a guest appearance on "Thunder In Your Heart", a song he co-wrote and it's a song that really hits the spot. Impera have matured and honed their sound to perfection and this is their best outing yet.

CHINA SKY - CHINA SKY II
ESM272 - Out 20th February 2015

A lot can change in 25 years. Countless fashion trends have come and gone, MTV stopped playing music videos, people began to explore a whole new universe called "the internet" and a forgotten album by a group called China Sky became a cult classic. With its soaring melodies, lush harmonies and flawless production, China Sky seemed destined to be a classic from the word go. Success seemed just around the corner, but six weeks later the band China Sky was no more. Now, 25 years later, China Sky has entered the studio to begin production of their second album. Ron Perry sums it up: "We feel the new material is better than anything on the first album, and we're incredibly excited about taking the band in the direction we had originally intended. We are in control of everything this time, and that makes all the difference". A lot can change in 25 years!

TALON - FOUR PLAY
ESM273 - Out 20th March 2015

Featuring:
Michael O'Mara- Kory Voxen - Jim Kee - Phil Keller - John Parker
Special Guest Musicians: Tim Pierce, Pete Fry

An American band based in California, TALON was born from the ashes of VOXEN – a band that achieved international success with their release "Sacrifice", which included a track that was used in the major motion picture "Outbreak". 2015 and the band have gone back to their roots and Michael O'Mara is back behind the mic stand. To add to the excitement they had the great pleasure to have contributions from some amazing friends and guitarists involved in the release. With amazing tracks such as the emotional "Tonight", the in-your-face "Evil", the dirty groove of "Holly Would", this release is bound to show up on a lot of 10 Bests Lists for 2015!

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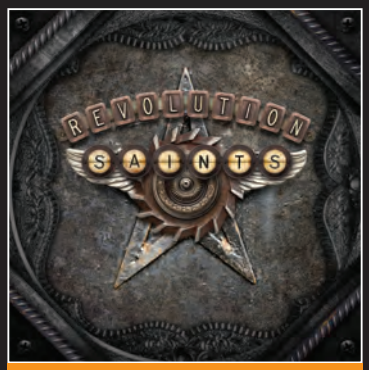


REVOLUTION SAINTS
'REVOLUTION SAINTS'
(Frontiers) **HARD ROCK**
Reviewed by Ian Johnson

The instant I played this album, I realised that I'd just had a Concorde moment... that moment when you experience a perfect second, minute or hour. One that will stay with you forever and Revolution Saints has done that to me each and every time I have played it.

Now as you should all know by now, this album features the immense talents of Doug Aldrich, Jack Blades and Deen Castronovo so I won't dwell on that. What I will say is that out of everything these three musicians have done before, this could easily be their best work and as you all know who they've played with, that's saying something!

Okay I will admit that "yes it does sound a lot like Journey" but seeing as Journey haven't put out anything this good in years, who cares? It isn't just a straight copy of that legendary group however; instead you will find elements of Melodic Rock and classic American Hard Rock nestling within the twelve songs that make up this self-titled album. This is all down to RS secret (well not really) weapon, Alessandro Del Vecchio. He has not only written or co-written all of the songs on the album but also given it a massive, and I do mean MASSIVE, sounding production. It is something that stuns you each time you get to hear it and he really is the unsung star of this release.

As for the actual songs, they say everything you ever could about Melodic Rock/AOR because they easily epitomize all that is excellent about this genre. As you listen to each of the songs, I promise the hairs will stand up on the back of your neck while the goose bumps run wild over your arms; this is always the signal that you're in the presence of something really quite extraordinary.

'Back On My Trail', first video 'Turn Back Time', 'Locked Out Of Paradise', 'Don't Walk Away', the stunning 'Strangers To This Life', 'How To Mend A Broken Heart' and the gorgeous 'In The Name Of The Father (Fernando's Song)', which is probably the best ballad of the last few years, are all tracks that overwhelm the senses and always leave you wanting and needing more.

There's also the added bonus of these songs being sung by a man whose voice just has to be heard to be believed in Castronovo. We all knew he could sing but wow, he's just incredible on this album and someone should lock up his drums for a while and make him (only) sing more often (with a shotgun if necessary). Thankfully Aldrich, Blades and Del Vecchio aren't too far behind him in their passion and drive for this album and its music either.

Usually about now I'd try to persuade you to buy this album – but what's the point? If you don't buy it then you really don't like Melodic Rock/AOR and you're definitely reading the wrong magazine. Is this possibly "Album Of 2015" already? Absolutely!!

CHINA SKY
'II'
(Escape) **HARD ROCK**
Reviewed by Ian Johnson

China Sky achieved cult status within the AOR community on the strength of their debut. That album is now a quarter of a century old and it's an astonishing fact that only six weeks after it surfaced, to rave reviews and a lot of U.S. radio airplay, the band broke up and went their separate ways (see interview for explanation).

It is even more amazing that after almost twenty-five years without even thinking about the name CS, the band are back together. That is down to one thing; the fans of the band from around the world who were regularly contacting singer Ron Perry to ask if he could get them a copy of the debut or asking him to sign something for them. So intrigued was Perry that when an offer from Escape was made, it was all that was needed for the group to re-enter the studio and record a new album.

Thankfully CS haven't tried recapture or to re-record the debut, instead they've let those twenty-five years of worldly experience and maturity of life inform their song-writing and what we get from them on 'II' is a classy Hard Rock album full of songs with lyrics about life love and the world we all live in.

For example, 'One Life' is an autobiographical story of the band's journey from 1988 to now. With its highly melodic guitar riff and Perry's warm and emotion-filled vocals, this song is a perfect way to re-introduce CS to their audience both old and new. Then there is the up-tempo 'You're Not The One' and the hard-edged 'I Believe In You' where guitarist Steve Wheeler's shows his skills and the harmony vocals kill. 'I'm Survivor' has a hook that is immediately unforgettable and the whole band just seem to be having a ball yet 'The Richest Man In The World' is a laid back ballad that shows the maturity previously mentioned with lyrics that discuss what life is all about, which isn't money and power but love. 'The Darkness' and 'Give It Up' are two more high quality Hard Rock tracks that are full of stellar musicianship all leading up to the albums closing cut which is the stunning 'Dreams I'll Never See'. This song has a driving bass line courtesy of original band member Richard Smith and when it's joined with Perry's strong vocal presence and Wheeler's Funky guitar soloing, you know you're listening to a band who have all the bases covered.

As I listened to this release, the twenty-five year gap between 'I' and 'II' just melted away and on continued plays, I have grown to really love 'II'. What a year it looks like it's going to be for music in 2015!

TOTO
'XIV'
(Frontiers) **ROCK**
Reviewed by Phil Ashcroft

It's perhaps timely that the most varied and musically skilled of all the big AOR bands should release a new album, not just because it's their first for nine years, but also because artists like Work Of Art, Lionville and AOR have all made waves in the meantime with a sound highly reminiscent of the U.S. group. The return of original bassist David Hungate puts the band in a good place historically, joining guitarist Steve Lukather and keyboardists David Paich and Steve Porcaro as founding members, whilst Joseph Williams has also injected the band with the right amount of vocal chops since his re-introduction in 2010. Replacing the departed Simon Phillips, celebrated session drummer Keith Carlock acquits himself brilliantly alongside percussionist Lenny Castro and several other special guest musicians and singers.

On the whole, the album follows the same path as Williams' last Toto platter, 'The Seventh One', with hints of the more upbeat 'Fahrenheit' and their most recent offering, 'Falling In Between'. 'Running Out Of Time', for instance, has the same Progressive edge as the latter, built around an urgent beat and stunning Lukather guitar riffs and melodies; the keys, rhythm section and irresistible harmonies adding the icing, along with the brilliant arrangement. The mid-paced 'Holy War', lively 'Orphan' and the aptly named '21st Century Blues' also have Lukather's inspired guitar parts and incredible solos, each with stunning musicianship, great vocals and infectious grooves. Williams sounds just superb on all the songs he sings, particularly 'Burn' with its gentle piano, orchestral touches and bursts of dramatic power on the chorus. But both Lukather and Paich chip in with a cool vocal or two, particularly Lukather's majestic 'Unknown Soldier (For Jeffrey)' and Paich's West Coast ballad 'All The Tears That Shine'.

None of the songs can be faulted and the sheer variety of sounds and styles that make up Toto are all represented, with the Funky duo 'Chinatown' and 'Fortune' also scoring highly, along with the infectious Pop of 'The Little Things'. However, saving the best for last, the wonderful 'Great Expectations' is a 'Home Of The Brave' style lengthy workout with many different parts, from the uplifting piano and acoustic guitar of the intro to moments of Progressive Rock and Jazz, all neatly sewn together amid a wash of clever vocal parts and catchy instrumentation. It's a perfect ending to a particularly strong Toto album, one on which some songs are immediate and others need a few plays to fully appreciate.

One thing that hits you right away is the stunning production; the band working with top session keyboard player C.J. Vanston, a man who obviously loves and understands the music of Toto as well as the band do themselves. It's been a long time since I've heard an album as classy as this one, and hopefully not another nine years until I hear the next one.

A PLASTIC ROSE – 'FLICKERING LIGHT OF AN INNER WAR' *(Di Di Mau)* MODERN/ALTERNATIVE

A Plastic Rose have released this, their second album, through Spotify which is a novel approach, allowing happy listeners to test it out then buy it through Pledgemusic. This is all their promotional bumph tells me, so I don't know who they are, where they come from or any of that... you know... all the useful and important stuff. Thank Bod then for Facebook, which at least points me in the direction of Belfast, although their website says Nottingham. Fuck it… just listen to the album Alan…

APR have what I'd call a very modern sound. They aren't afraid to crank up their guitars and throw in a little shouting (thankfully only a little), mixing hard hitting Indie with British Heavy Rock and smattering of Pop Punk. They remind me musically a little bit of Lost Prophets.

There's a sweet mixture of full-on Rock coupled with the feeling that you're listening to a future anthem, especially on 'Avarice' which takes U2 and Muse and shakes them by their necks before kicking them up the arse. The vocalist has a good range with a decent emotional content and when A Plastic Rose really get going, it's highly entertaining.

Of course, like all bands with an Indie core, they can get a bit dull ('Garavogue') or up their collective arse (the album title says it all), but in general this is a decent album that deserved an audience if only because there will be plenty of people who will realise that this is exactly what they've been looking for to fill the gap until the next NME darlings come along.

Alan Holloway

AC/DC – 'ROCK OR BUST' *(Columbia)* HARD ROCK

Everyone knows the story about Malcolm Young so no need to elaborate here, although it is worth pointing out that all the songs were accumulated by Angus Young from song-writing sessions left over by the Young brothers from previous albums; so not exactly re-inventing the wheel here, but Malcom Young does get credit.

As I write this, it has become a Number One album in eleven different countries and Top Five in a further twelve, and with total sales over 1.4 million as we speak, it kind of pooh-poohs Gene Simmons' notion that Rock is dead.

Malcolm and Angus' nephew Stevie Young has replaced Malcolm Young on rhythm guitar – the only change in personnel since Phil Rudd replaced Chris Slade after 1990's 'The Razors Edge' and subsequent two-year tour, although Rudd has done a good job of trying to get himself kicked out subsequently. So what do we have here from the shortest released album in AC/DC's history at just under thirty-five minutes, beating the previous record held by 'Flick Of The Switch'?

'Play Ball' has been released as the first single and it's simple Riff and Roll with a melodic chorus that has typical AC/DC DNA. Second single and titular 'Rock Or Bust' is actually the lead-off track starting with a staccato riff that pricks up the ears, but again is typical AC/DC fare. As is the boogie of 'Hard Times', the tongue-in-cheek dirty riffs of 'Rock The House' and the rhythmic 'Got Some Rock & Roll Thunder' complete with gang vocals on the chorus.

However, AC/DC haven't really done a song like 'Rock The Blues Away' since the days of Bon Scott and I wonder if it was a really old song kicking around that's been updated somewhat, certainly the strong Bluesy feel and lyrics about drinking are reminiscent of their 1970's era. 'Dogs Of War' is also slightly more interesting with a stealth-like intro and riding along on a steady incessant beat with a strong melodic rhythm from Stevie Young who absolutely holds true to Malcolm Young's legacy. And it's nice to hear AC/DC rev it up a little with the up-tempo Hard Rock of 'Baptism By Fire' complete with Angus Young's catchy guitar refrain.

Brian Johnson still has that unmistakable Northern rasp but with less fire these days, understandable for a man who qualifies for his bus pass, but AC/DC hardly get out of second gear and considering the classic and harder 'Black Ice' was released six years ago, this smacks of tying up loose ends or Angus Young not wanting to release anything not involving his brother. This is not a classic by any stretch and suffice to say it's almost certainly their last ever album.

Carl Buxton

ADRENALINE MOB – 'DEARLY DEPARTED' *(Century Media)* HEAVY METAL

Not a band to let the grass grow under their feet – since their inception around four years ago they've released two full-length albums and three EP's (of which this is the third albeit one that's nine tracks and forty-two minutes long) – Adrenaline Mob are nothing if not prolific.

Formed around the nucleus of vocalist Russell Allen (Symphony X), guitarist extraordinaire Mike Orlando and one-time Dream Theater/Avenged Sevenfold drummer Mike Portnoy (who has since left the group to be replaced by AJ Pero), they play a very groove-oriented brand of intense "thinking man's Metal" which, whilst disconcertingly abrasive at first, is actually quite compelling once it sinks its hooks into your cerebral cortex. It's not even been a year since their last studio album 'Men Of Honor' first saw the light of day, but in an effort to keep the momentum going, the band have recorded another maxi-EP to satisfy their ever growing army of fans.

Similar in some respects to 2013's highly successful 'Coverta' EP, 'Dearly Departed' features a selection of covers (four in total), plus three acoustic tracks (two from 'Omerta' and one from '...Honor'), a radio edit of '...Departed' itself and the previously unreleased 'Gets You Through The Night' (a leftover from the '...Honor' sessions).

Starting with the one new track, '...Night' has a real Dio feel to it and is, in my humble opinion, worth the admission price alone. This kind of amphetamine-fuelled Hard Rock is Allen in his natural element in my way of thinking and he turns in a snarling performance ol' Ronnie James would've been justly proud of! Additionally, Orlando once again proves why prestigious industry commentators like Guitar Player Magazine rate his talent so highly by turning in a stunning display of expertly controlled brutality.

If I am honest, most of the time I can take or leave acoustic tracks depending on my mood, but the likes of 'Crystal Clear' and 'All On The Line' have a beguiling, oft addictively melancholic atmosphere that makes them as compelling, if not more so, than the originals!

As for the covers I hear you ask? My personal favourite has to be their deliciously rabid run through of the old Charlie Daniels Band standard 'Devil Went Down To Georgia' (another prime example of Orlando's talents), although with a sterling Black Sabbath medley, Pat Travers' 'Snortin' Whiskey' and the Queen classic 'Tie Your Mother Down' you really can't go wrong. This is indeed another impressive release from this impressive group.

Dave Cockett

ALBERTO RIGONI – 'OVERLOADED' *(Any And All)* INSTRUMENTAL

I'm guessing that instrumental solo albums by bass players probably aren't at the top of the average Fireworks reader's shopping lists, even my own extensive instrumental collection doesn't go any further than Stanley Clarke, Stu Hamm and Jeff Berlin.

As well as being a member of Daniele Liverani's Twinspirits, bassist for Italian Pop diva Alexia and founder of Electro Pop duo Lady And The Bass, this is Italian Alberto Rigoni's fourth solo album, and whilst he has previously pulled in the likes of Kevin Moore (ex-Dream Theater), Gavin Harrison (Porcupine Tree), Goran Edman (Malmsteen etc.) and Mark Cross (Firewind), amongst others, this time he's mostly providing employment for fellow countrymen.

Joined by drummer Denis Novello, keyboardist Federico Solazzo and a few guest guitarists, Rigoni has some interesting ideas here and the mix of Progressive and Symphonic themes on the title track are augmented by the brilliant Marco Sfogli from James LaBrie's band. DGM guitarist Simone Mularoni shreds on the stop/start fusion of 'Corruption' and the accessible 'Ubick', whilst the tuneful 'Liberation' has some amazing work from respected Shrapnel Records solo artist Fabrizio Leo and is easily the best tune here.

The other five tracks don't feature a guitarist and are a bit of a mixed bag, from the pleasant multi-tracked bass solo 'Glory Of Life' and the Chroma Key-like mix of music and sound effects of 'Floating Capsule', to the dense, distorted and mostly unlistenable 'Chron' and the pointless opening track 'What's On Your Mind'.

The playing is exemplary and the production is pretty sharp too, but the market for an album like this is limited and it isn't one I'll return to very often; one for bass players and Prog-Metal completists only.

Phil Ashcroft

ALOGIA – 'ELEGIA BALCANICA' *(Miner)* PROGRESSIVE

The six-piece Serbian Rockers return to Rock the Heavy Metal firmament with "a dose of Balkan atmosphere" adding to the cultural and authentic nature of what they do, which certainly belongs in the Power Prog Metal field. The disappointed reaction to their previous 2012 release 'Price O Snovima' ('Tales Of Dreams') sees them return this time with a much more direct and harder edged effort.

Having delivered the goods at some big name festivals and opened for some considerably respected bands, as well as building up a thirteen album catalogue, they seem on the brink of making the next step with 'Elegia Balcanica' (Balkan Elegy) which continues the bold step of singing in their native language. To be frank, it does leave the lyrical content a mystery to those of us English speakers, but having said that they are working on an English language version of the record having done the same with their first album.

As for the content, there's no doubt that Alogia possess the credentials to sit comfortably within the genre alongside their peers. Musically and technically impressive, the opening instrumental flurry of melodic notes from guitar and synth in an overture entitle 'Almagest' gives a flavour of what to expect in the next half hour or so before segueing into 'Callis Ad Astra' which has a typically catchy chorus amidst some swirling keys and more guitar.

The single 'Vreme Je' is a full-on galloping piece of Melodic Hard Rock with vocals hitting the higher registers while the title track verges on the epic; an "other worldly" drone and thumping Eastern-styled riff and rhythm provides a thrilling introduction before a typically

AMERICAN MAFIA – 'ROCK 'N' ROLL HIT MACHINE' *(Grooveyard)* HARD ROCK

Ready, aim, fire! American Mafia has entered the scene and blown us all away, luckily only in a musical way. The New York-based Hard Rock band have unleashed their powerful twelve track debut 'Rock 'N' Roll Hit Machine' providing us with a nice dose of 1970's Blues-soaked Hard Rock which reminds me of early Foreigner mixed with Whitesnake and Bad Company.

The clan was initiated by Doro Pesch's guitarist Tom Jude and Freddy Villano (Quiet Riot, Holy Water, Widowmaker) on the bass and is completed with Dokken-drummer Bobby Marks. Since there's the phrase "a band is only as strong as their singer", the guys opted for and can boast of including six outstanding Rock vocalist specimens; John West (Badlands, Artension, Royal Hunt), Jimmy Kunes (Cactus, Savoy Brown, Flood The Engine), Don Chaffin (VOX, Red Lamb), Mike DiMeo (Riot, Masterplan, The Lizards), Ed Terry (Rondinelli, Rage & Beyond) and David Knight (Holy Water). Sadly one has to mention the tragic suicide of the latter in 2014... Rest In Peace, Mr. Knight.

'...Machine' opens with 'Obsession', a pounding, Funk-influenced Hard Rock track with Terry on vocals. During the Southern Rock styled 'Every Time' Kunes is tearing his vocal chords apart and reminds me of a rougher Jimmy Barnes.

'Your Good Lovin'' is a Bluesy masterpiece with West on vocals while 'Death & Satisfaction' only leaves satisfaction behind. It begins with a groovy, Bluesy harmonica that Aerosmith couldn't have done better and develops into a phenomenal Blues Rock track that I personally played on repeat countless times. 'Friendly Fire', 'If I Knew' and 'Man On The Flying Trapeze' show the band's tightness and skills to a large extent. The killer cover of Stevie Wonder's 'Living In The City' featuring Knight on vocals is a genius strike. 'The Sky Is Falling' is a nice, smooth, classical 1980's Melodic Rock piece and the beautiful ballad 'All I Need' adds some refreshing variety to the record.

Altogether '...Machine' comes along like a flashback to the late 1970's when music was written with a lot of passion and soul. From all angles, this album contains one cracker after another from the song-writing to the musical and vocal performances. The six singers add their consistently brilliant and different sounds and styles to the twelve creative Rock gems that feature a range of varied influences that include Blues, Hard Rock and Melodic Rock with even a little Funk and Psychedelica here and there.

A lot of diversity and a fantastic production make this record turn out to be a passionate shot through the heart. I can't wait for summer to begin, take 'Rock 'N' Roll Hit Machine' to my car and let it blast out of the open windows.

Julia Braun

intense vocal and impressive stuttering guitar solo.

It's the Brankovic brothers standing proud as both the backbone of the band musically on guitars, making their presence felt all through the album, as well as being the masterminds in the formation of Alogia.

The closing cut 'Intentionally Blind' sees Alogia drifting into the dense deep vocals in a song which allows them to show their chops in a more Speed Metal direction and it rounds off the record with a pacey Metallic bang.

With 'Elegia Balcanica', Alogia have managed to pull themselves back onto the rails and are full steam ahead in showing that they are more than capable of using the medium of Prog Metal to cross the language barrier.

Mike Ainscoe

ALPHA TIGER – 'IDENTITY' *(Steamhammer/SPV)* POWER METAL

Now this is interesting... an old-school, Progressively-infused, Melodic Metal band from Freiburg in Germany; young upstarts Alpha Tiger have thus far largely passed U.K. audiences by. However, with the release of their third album 'iDentity', I'm sure all that's about to change as anyone with a penchant for old-school Queensryche or Fates Warning, mixed in with a tincture of Iron Maiden, Riot or Armored Saint, would be well advised to check them out at the earliest opportunity.

Previously called Satin Black (under which epithet they released an album 'Harlequin' back in 2008 followed by the 'Martyr's Paradise' EP some two years later), they switched to AT in 2011 and have never really looked back since. Characterised by the sky skimming vocals of front-man Stephan Dietrich (very Michael Kiske), and the razor sharp, twin lead guitar attack of Peter Langforth and Alexander Backasch, the AT soundscape is heavy on melody and melodrama yet delivered with a crisp, unmistakably Metallic bite.

Signed to Steamhammer/SPV after having been dropped by Century Media last year, 'iDentity' proves itself to be their most accomplished release to date, the perfect middle digit salute to their former patron's if ever there was one!

After the obligatory moody intro piece (can't quite pinpoint the tune, but for some reason I recognise it) opener 'Lady Liberty' roars into life. Born aloft by some decidedly frenetic riffs, it is highly reminiscent of early Queensryche at times, albeit a Queensryche with the aforementioned former Helloween front-man on vocals! Following cut 'Scripted Reality' (nice title!) slows thing down a little and moves the band into a sort of hybrid Angra meets Helloween territory… tasty stuff indeed!

And in reality, having grabbed your undivided attention with that opening salvo the band never really let go. Filled with plenty of ambient light and shade, moody time changes and deliciously piquant angst, tracks such as 'This World Will Burn', 'We Won't Take It Anymore' and 'Revolution In Progress' all hit their target first time and maintain interest with supreme ease through that first half a dozen or so spins.

Deceptively sophisticated, expertly crafted, Melodic Progressive Power Metal, 'iDentity' should by rights push Alpha Tiger into the major leagues… very impressive!

Dave Cockett

AMMUNITION – 'SHANGHAIED' *(AOR Heaven)* MELODIC ROCK

Norwegian Glam Rock superstars Wig Wam called it a day back in March 2014, mostly due to the fact that guitarist Teeny (Trond Holter) and bassist Flash (Bernt Jansen) had been performing in Jorn Lande's solo band. It was inevitable that front-man Glam (Åge Sten Nilsen) would resurface at some point, and while Nordic Beast saw Nilsen performing Live Rock classics with Europe's John Norum and Mic Michaeli alongside Motorhead's Mikkey Dee, Ammunition sees Nilsen's first recorded work since WW's 'Wall Street' swansong. Enlisting current Melodic Rock legend Erik Mårtensson as guitarist and co-writer was a masterstroke that adds a certain gravitas whilst Mårtensson has also brought his Eclipse/W.E.T. drumming colleague Robban Bäck along for the ride. The line-up is completed by Nilsen's NB bassist band-mate Hal Patino (King Diamond, Pretty Maids), WW's keyboardist Lasse Finbråthen (Circus Maximus) and Bad Habits guitarist Jon Pettersen.

I've always been a WW fan, but I found their albums ('Wig Wamania' aside) a little patchy, but I'm pleased to report that every track on 'Shanghaied' is a winner. Unusually, the better songs with the bigger choruses can be found in the album's latter half, which includes 'Do You Like It', 'Another Piece Of Me', 'Strung Out' and the simply wonderful 'Wild Kard'. Even the songs that are, shall we say, "less than spectacular" remain irresistible thanks to the immense vocal harmonies and excellent twin guitar arrangements that lift them well above average.

Those yearning for more of Nilsen's previous incarnation of Glam won't be disappointed as the spirit of WW lives on throughout a strong portion of this album due to the quirky nature of the arrangements and the occasionally obtuse lyric – check out title track 'Shanghaied' for the perfect example! Elsewhere 'Hit Me (With Your Bombs)' and the single 'Tie Me Down' are huge Glam anthems (that's the genre, not the man!) and 'Take Out The Enemies' is an adrenaline-fuelled, rip-roaring Rocker with an alluring melody.

However, those who found WW a little cheesy could still be satisfied with Ammunition's more mature side, with the twin ballads obviously being the biggest example. 'Heart's Not In It' is a lighter-waving Stadium Rock power ballad with a Bluesy edge that brings to mind prime Aerosmith and Bon Jovi, whereas the gently building 'Road To Babylon' is simply stunning. It's a thought provoking cautionary tale with a lyric that Dare's Darren Wharton would be proud of that's equalled by a wonderful vocal from Nilsen who has never sounded better.

Nilsen and the ever-busy Mårtensson have combined to create a damn fine album, though Glam's glittery cat-suits have been consigned to history, the heart and soul of the pseudonym survives with Ammunition; highly recommended.

Ant Heeks

ANGEL'S REVENGE – 'BLOOD, SWEAT AND FEARS' *(Independent)* HEAVY METAL

When vocalist Holly Hines and bassist Jacob Freed collaborated together on material with producer and Hydrogen guitarist Jeff Westlake, the seeds of Angels Revenge were sown. The project became reality with the addition of guitarists Sam Demastus and John Holmes with Justen Flannagan on drums and the end result is their first release 'Blood Sweat And Fears'.

As debut albums go it's not a bad first effort, if a little rough around the edges, coming across as a heavier Skid Row with a modern edge and more ferocious drumming. The real secret weapon here, that elevates the material above the chasing pack, are the vocals of Hines. What an absolute find she is; a real powerhouse of a singer with a hugely melodic style combining the smooth sweetness of Delain's Charlotte Wessels with the edgy grit of Jody Turner from the almost long lost but recently reformed Rock Goddess.

'Crazy' features a driving riff with a big hook while 'One In The Chamber' has that modern edge which keeps things current and out of the 1980s. 'As Time Goes On' gives Hines a real chance to shine vocally with plenty of light and shade to show off her full box of vocal histrionics while 'Sweet Addiction' could well be something that could appear on the forthcoming Halestorm album. 'Lost', which comes towards the tail end of the album, brings a nice, moody change of pace to close things out (bar a reprise of 'Angel's Revenge' on my digital copy) and once again Hines shows her class.

Overall there's plenty of potential on 'Blood Sweat And Fears' with some good songs and solid performances by the band, but it is Hines that raises the standard of the material to a higher level. If they can build on the foundations of their debut, it'll be interesting to see what Angels Revenge come up with next.

Mick Burgess

BATTLE BEAST – 'UNHOLY SAVIOR' *(Nuclear Blast)* POWER METAL

I first came across Battle Beast in 2013 and I absolutely adored them and their self-titled release from the first listen. I quickly became a huge fan of the Finnish Female-Fronted six-piece with their combination of furious progressions, frantic rhythms and wall-paper stripping vocals. It therefore goes without saying, I was as excitable as a child overdosed on E numbers when their latest offering 'Unholy Savior' landed in my inbox... and frankly... I was right to be.

The album erupts in real style with an opening three song salvo that goes straight for the throat. The first of this fantastic trio is the absolute ripper that is 'Lionheart' where the rhythm section bounds along aided by a driven riff and some chants before the chorus explodes with an injection of pace and a catchy, bellowed choral line. There is no chance to catch your breath as the title track follows straight after with more pounding rhythms and a chugging progression that leads to another memorable chorus that is delivered via a mixture of chants and Noora Louhimo yells.

The last of this opening salvo is 'I Want The World... And Everything In It' which, unlike the previous two, is riotous from the start with its rampaging guitars and gutsy vocals. The chorus is another belter that reminds me of 'Let It Roar' from the last album with some scowled words before Louhimo lets rip with some roars of her own; she really does have one hell of a set of lungs.

The latter half of the album unleashes another favourite song; the eighties-influenced 'Touch In The Night'. The verse features softer vocals, some pulsing synth and a retro driven riff that all converges into an exceedingly infectious chorus. It is a real retro-trip and has me boogieing in my chair every time it comes on. There's also an eighties-inspired slant to the progression of 'Far, Far Away' that also has a chanted chorus and more outrageous wails from Louhimo.

Aside from these tracks there is also the top gear pace of 'Madness' and 'Speed And Danger' that appear mid-album which include plenty of double drumming "madness" and frenzied riffing at top "speed". At the other end of the pace scale there are two beautiful ballads; 'Sea Of Dreams' which appears between the aforementioned pair and 'Angel Cry' which closes out the album.

Battle Beast have delivered a fabulous album that is full of even more cracking riffs and seriously contagious choruses than their last. Both the band and their leading lady are on outstanding form and this album is the earliest contender for my "2015 Top 5" list and potentially one to consider for the top spot itself. In short, an absolute Power Metal monster.

Dave Scott

ANGRA – 'SECRET GARDEN' *(earMusic)* POWER METAL

After a self-imposed four year hiatus, the Brazilian Power Metal juggernaut known as Angra return with what could easily be their best album so far. Entitled 'Secret Garden', it's a concept piece based around the story of a scientist who loses his wife in a tragic accident and then has to reconsider his non-Christian/atheist beliefs and re-evaluate whether she is still with him, even though he cannot see or feel her.

The lyrical content of the eleven songs focuses on the deep feelings of loss, religion/scientific argument and finally salvation and they are (for me personally) the strongest the band have written. Having Doro Pesch and Simone Simons (Epica) as guests, playing at different times the voice of his departed wife, angels and parts of his subconscious, whilst various other band members take on the other character's voices doesn't hurt either. However, before we get to the music, I must highlight and tip my hat to the work of Roy Z who handled the pre-production and Jens Bogren who recorded, produced and mixed everything, because the sound they have come up with is simply immense.

As for the songs, 'Newborn Me' starts the story off with the ominous sounds of the accident, then we hear a ventilator pumping oxygen until the band blast in with a heavy keyboard and guitar riff that attacks from the very first note. New(ish) boy Fabio Lione is straight away the revelation on this album as I've never heard him sound better and from this classy start, '...Garden' continues to build and grow.

'Final Light' is a brooding mid-paced song with wonderful Latin American rhythms hidden subtly in the song's melodies whilst the solo guitar work of Rafael Bittencourt and Kiko Loureiro is mesmerizing. 'Storm Of Emotions' is a beautifully laid back song full of emotion and feeling, whereas the title track featuring Simons is an epic (sorry) track with full orchestration and some stunning musical arrangements; this offering really is the album's tour-de-force.

Oddest song has to go to 'Synchronicity II' (yes that Police song), which is given the full Angra treatment and fits so well that you if you hadn't heard it before, you'd never know it wasn't one of the bands own songs. Finally there's 'Crushing Room', a duet between Bittencourt and Doro which is just astonishing and, along with '...Emotions', deserves to go down as one of Angra's greatest songs.

As comeback albums go, this one is a little bit special and old fans of the band, as well as potential newcomers, should give this quite extraordinary album the time it needs and deserves to wield its magic upon them; a simply fantastic album from a simply fantastic band.

Ian Johnson

ANTHONY PHILLIPS – 'HARVEST OF THE HEART: AN ANTHOLOGY' *(Esoteric)* PROGRESSIVE

Anthony Phillips was a founding member of Genesis but a combination of stage-fright and glandular fever saw him depart after the 'Trespass' album. He went on to study orchestration and harmony at the Guildhall School Of Music And Drama in London. As well as teaching, he carried on composing and recording and re-entered the scene with a debut solo album ('The Geese & The Ghost') in 1977. Since then, he's released a large number of albums as well as composing for film and TV as well as musicals.

This sumptuous, re-mastered, five disc collection lavishly presented as a hardback book with a sixty-two page booklet, covers a good selection of material across his considerable canon as well as delivering some previously un-released tracks, some of which will be of considerable interest to Genesis completists thanks to the presence of Phil Collins.

The collection features a whopping ninety tracks so I can only give you an overview of what's on offer and some highlights.

The opening number 'F Sharp', a demo, will be familiar to Genesis fans, I won't spoil the surprise, while 'Silver Song' is sung by Collins; it's a decent, upbeat song. In fact much of the material on disc one is redolent of early Genesis, you can tell who influenced their pastoral sound of that time. Parts of the 'Scottish Suite' sees the electric side of Phillips emerge; some sections being somewhat Avant garde.

It's fair to say that Phillips doesn't possess the strongest of voices so the best of the songs are those sung by guests such as 'Um & Aargh' (The Vicar) and 'Compression' (Noel McCalla) which was a b-side to Rutherford's 'Working In Line' single (taken from the 'Smallcreep's Day' album). 'Bleak House' and 'Nightmare' are piano and synthesiser-based and led rather than guitar.

Disc five highlights Phillips' prowess as a writer of music for film and TV, the first six tracks are all orchestral in nature and just asking to be used as the accompaniment to visual media. 'I Wish This Would Never End' picks up the pace and is a delightfully tuneful electric guitar instrumental. 'Speak Of Remarkable Things' is a short but very sweet piano piece whilst 'River Of Life' is delightful.

This disc also includes ten previously un-released tracks which vary from ambient to gentle piano and synth vignettes to the kind of acoustic guitar refrains familiar to Genesis and Steve Hackett fans. None of these un-released tracks are unworthy of inclusion and offer the aficionado a reason to dig deep and buy this collection. For the less committed fan, this expansive array of music represents a superb introduction to a prolific artist.

Gary Marshall

ARAPACIS – 'A DISTURBING AWAKENING' *(Ravenheart)* HARD ROCK

AraPacis are a Female-Fronted band from Montreal Canada and this is their fourth full-length release and one that features guests Don Airey (Deep Purple, Rainbow, Ozzy Osbourne) and Guy Leblanc (Camel). The music, to be honest, is an incoherent mess of ideas and singer Shelle Macpherson's vocals are an acquired taste!

Starting off in Hard Rock fashion with an old-school guitar riff ('Sorrow Of A Lost War'), it brought to mind Tygers Of Pan Tang however the vocals (to my ears) seem somewhat flat and the drums, at best, sound amateur. The presence of Airey saves the song from obscurity thanks to some fine keyboard work.

The primitive clutter of 'Broken Windows' is closer to something L7 may have attempted and it works far better vocally. 'Wanderlust' is an unspectacular mixture of Indie and Prog Rock, while 'With Ghosts, In Hell I Stand' throws in everything from mandolins to double bass drums.

At least 'Godless', with a darker direction, works as a whole though the mixture of a vocal sounding like someone is choking is quite comical, especially paired with an "out of tune angelic" sound following it.

In my opinion, the whole album is a muddle and it seems like AraPacis are trying to cover too much ground musically at once.

Ray Paul

AURON – 'AURON' *(Metal Scrap)* HEAVY METAL

Auron are a Russian Progressive and Melodic Heavy Metal band who have now released their brand new debut album that's full of playful textures and layers. The dynamics are creative and bring so much flavour to the record. The guitars are to the forefront and the highlight of the album with two lead guitars that have a solid connection and chemistry during each track; the harmonies are of excellence and the solos satisfy that itch.

The opening track 'Obsessions' captures you instantly with dramatic keyboard effects and a driving rhythm section. It has to be said that for the majority of the record that the vocals don't quite fit within the character and quality and that is one of the album's downsides. The melodies are very similar between each track and there is a strong need for diversity and a want for hooks; the guitar pulls you in but the melody fails to engage the listener. There has also been a lot of production put on to the vocals; it is almost bordering on the verge of Cher. 'Heroes Of Last Generation' is an exception, the chorus is definitely catchy and the rhythm and melody tie nicely together; the cheeky cowbell is certainly an entertaining feature.

The guitars of Nikolay Bogov and Roman Lepaev are technical and complex and it's definitely a trait of these guys. 'Word And Deed' showcases their talent very well as does 'Prelude To H-Moll' which is technically different with crazy time signatures and an Avant guard feeling to the song structure. A medal for bravery for pushing the boundaries of the norm should be awarded as this is a truly excellent piece of musicianship.

The main part of the album (my copy has an additional two Russian titled offerings afterwards) closes with the self-titled track 'Auron', a powerful song with a slightly Thrash style. It could certainly be described as an awakener with dynamic contrasts that are phenomenal. There is a slight inspiration of Jeff Waters and the great thing about this track is the key composition they have created. It can forever be adapted or have additional layers created; it's a piece you can re-work many times and it will still sound fantastic.

If there was a way to sum up the sound of Auron it would be "retro futuristic". There are some great retro elements to this album but all sounding very futuristic. This album is has an unfamiliar quality which makes it a great listen... sure, it's an acquired taste... but an album you can appreciate with effort.

Lara Kisel

BLACKBERRY SMOKE – 'HOLDING ALL THE ROSES' *(Earache)* SOUTHERN/COUNTRY/FOLK

Though they've been around for thirteen years now, it was only in 2014 with the U.K. release of 'The Whippoorwill' that I became familiar with Blackberry Smoke, the Atlanta quintet becoming the most impressive band that appeared on my radar last year. Are they a Southern Rock band, a Country band, or simply a Rock 'n' Roll band? In fact they sit comfortably within all three categories without straying too far into one specific genre to become pigeonholed, much like the Eagles managed to do. It ensures mass appeal and their relocation to Earache Records can only be the start of their well-deserved leap into the mainstream.

Four albums and two E.P's in thirteen years isn't exactly prolific, yet barely a year after album three ('...Whippoorwill') and the ensuing lengthy world tour comes the follow-up 'Holding All The Roses', recorded under the guidance of Brendan O'Brien (Black Crowes, Pearl Jam, Bruce Springsteen) in just eleven days, something that gives '...Roses' a fresh, raw vibe that sounds amazing without being over-produced. Aside from the sprawling, Bluesy ballad 'Woman In The Moon' with its subtle string arrangements, it's a rowdy, raw and Rocking album yet it still manages to expertly blend acoustic guitar with the electric riffs. The songs are more concise and livelier than those of its predecessor, with more immediate melodies, while it also benefits from a grittier edge and a smattering of "good 'ol cussing" strewn throughout Charlie Starr's often intriguing lyrics.

The more Country-sounding element of BS's output can be found in the glorious mid-tempo 'Living In The Song', the acoustic-based 'Too High', the cheeky tale of incest that is 'Lay It All On Me' and the shuffling ballad 'No Way Back To Eden', while the exhilaratingly raucous 'Holding All The Roses' itself has a fiddle vying for attention amongst the twin guitar attack of Starr and Paul Jackson. Elsewhere it's pretty much Classic Rock 'n' Roll all the way; opener and first single 'Let Me Help You (Find The Door)' is all Rolling Stones riffery with a real earworm of a chorus, the chugging 'Rock And Roll Again' is prime Status Quo, 'Wish Is One Hand' is a compellingly catchy Rocker with a great guitar workout, 'Payback's A Bitch' a darker cautionary tale (that was first aired on the live 'Leave A Scar' album) and the closing 'Fire In The Hole' is a classic-sounding seventies Southern Rock anthem with swirling Hammond Organ flurries constructed around the grinding rhythm.

'Holding All The Roses' is an American metaphor for being a winner, which tells you everything you need to know about this album. This Blackberry is well and truly Smokin'... superstardom surely beckons.

Ant Heeks

AVENGER – 'THE SLAUGHTER NEVER STOPS' *(Rocksector)* HEAVY METAL

Although never as popular as their NWOBHM peers Saxon or Iron Maiden, Newcastle-based five-piece Avenger still had their fifteen minutes of fame before disbanding in 1985. Now having returned to the studio after almost thirty years of hiatus, they must have realized there's no time or place for music experimentation on 'The Slaughter Never Stops' – and with an album embedded in that Rootsy Metal sound, they've certainly managed to keep their fire burning.

It's the majestic 'Mace Imperial' intro that goes first. Yet, in the first proper track on '... Stops', it becomes clear there's no exaggeration to the clichéd album title – 'Race Against Time' is all things NWOBHM with its muscular, fast riffs and raw vocals. There an almost live vibe to the aggressive background chanting of 'Fate', preceding the groovy 'Fields Of The Burnt' with some punchy rhythm section work and Maiden-esque flavours. 'Into The Nexus' is the fifth track and it rockets into four minutes of guitar-laden madness with its Speed Metal-infused, gritty sound. But if you thought this song's fiery coda is the fastest Avenger can ever get, the band soon wreaks their vengeance upon the disbelievers, getting even more furious in the next couple of tracks 'Decimated' and 'In Arcadia Go'; the latter of the two draws much from unmistakably Maiden-like aesthetics again, especially the early, Paul Di'Anno-fronted incarnation.

Speaking of Steve Harris and the gang is like speaking of the proverbial devil here, it seems, as the scream-laden eighth track turns out to be nothing else but Avenger's rendition of the title track of the Maiden's second album. And even though there's not much you can do with such staples of Metal music (apart from reflecting the original), Ian Swift's vocal feistiness would have surely made Di'Anno blush at least a bit now. The band segues from the high-pitched guitar squeals of 'Flayer Psychosis' to Punk-ish aggressiveness in 'Shot To Hell', leaving a spoonful of even more feistiness and fury as the final track 'Midnight Mass Destruction' approaches. That's what you could call a tasty dessert after the main course was served – so as to satisfy the palette of even the most demanding head-bangers!

Avenger's comeback album – the first since 1985's 'Killer Elite' – portrays the band in fine form not far from their 1980's glory days. A reflection of what the band and the genre always stood for rather than something new and particularly exciting, but still a fine solid album to bang your head to, 'The Slaughter Never Stops' is worth both a recommendation and a place in your Metal record collection.

Alexandra Mrozowska

BEARDFISH – '+4626 – COMFORTZONE' *(InsideOut)* PROGRESSIVE

On paper Beardfish is a band I should enjoy, being both Progressive and Swedish; however their music has never entirely won me over. To me they've not possessed the same knack of consistently writing and delivering memorable and engaging themes and melodies in the same manner as compatriots like The Flower Kings, Moon Safari or A.C.T. Often their

incomprehensible and sudden changes of direction into heavy, cacophonous, shouty and tuneless forays during otherwise pleasing songs have tended to detract rather than enhance.

On that basis I was going to decline this review until InsideOut PR man Freddy Palmer promised me that this album saw Beardfish in more melodic mood. Fortunately, my trust in him was not misplaced as, aside from a couple of places, the band has reined in the excesses with the result being that this album is much the better for it.

It opens quietly with 'The One Inside Part One', a barely audible guitar underpinning spoken word vocals before keyboards arrive part way through and the pace increases. 'Hold On' features a wonderful bass refrain, something common across the album, then a splendid guitar riff kicks in and a delightfully melodic song ensues. This is Beardfish at their most tuneful even when a grittier second half arrives.

The title track picks up a theme from earlier, firstly on guitar and then with piano; the interplay between the two is fabulous. I'm reminded of the mighty 10cc during this tremendous track where just the right degree of heaviness is introduced to add extra depth. 'Can You See Me Now?' is deceptive, a lovely jaunty piano refrain belying rather dark lyrics.

'King' has a strong and thoroughly engaging modern riff and an almost Prog Metal attitude while 'The One Inside Part Two' sees that theme appearing once more but this time as a gentle acoustic guitar refrain which is captivating; the use of electric guitar at the end is inspired arranging.

'Daughter/Whore' borders on Euro Metal in places, of all the tracks this is the most "out there" but it never gets to the levels I found dislikeable on previous albums. The challenging moments are kept mercifully brief. 'If We Must Be Apart' is the album's epic at over fifteen minutes in length. The opening organ sound is redolent of Focus while the initial melody rivals those of TFK; elsewhere both Yes and Deep Purple come to mind.

'Ode To The Rock 'N' Roller' is quirky, in a very good way, and 'The One Inside Part Three' ushers the album to its close on the back of other fine melody. Boy, am I glad I didn't pass on this album; undoubtedly their best yet.

Gary Marshall

BEN POOLE – 'LIVE AT THE ROYAL ALBERT HALL' *(Manhaton)* BLUES/SOUL

Ben Poole is a Blues guitarist of some pedigree – don't take my word for it, take the words of Jeff Beck who called him "fucking amazing" or the late, great Gary Moore who stated he was a "really great player", along with Richie Kotzen who claimed Poole would be "a household name for sure".

High praise indeed, which made me wonder how come this record was my first encounter with Poole. It turns out I'm not too far behind the curve – still in his mid-twenties, he released an EP which was produced by Bernie Tormé and followed that up with his debut album. The rest of the time he has spent touring his ass off.

Poole performed at the Royal Albert Hall and was recorded by the BBC for an airing on the Paul Jones Show – so delighted was he with the performance and the quality of the recordings, he decided to release it as a live album as proof that he considers himself a live player first and foremost.

'Let's Go Upstairs' is a great, groove laded Blues opener with R&B and Funk tinges, with Poole and Amy Eftekhari's vocals meshing beautifully. 'Love Nobody No More' is a slow burner that is bass driven and Blues drenched. Poole's emotive vocals are excellent and Sam Mason's electric piano underpins everything with great style.

'(I Know) I'm Losing You' encapsulates the listener and before you know it, nearly ten minutes have gone by before a spirited cover of Otis Redding's 'Mr. Pitiful' gets the feet tapping. 'It Doesn't Have To Be That Way' slows the pace and mines the same rich Blues vein that the likes of Joanne Shaw Taylor have had success with. 'Leave It On' sees the electric piano come to the fore, the sparse arrangement allowing Poole's soulful voice to take centre stage.

'Have You Ever Loved A Woman' rounds the set out with some guitar noodling, until the song builds and builds over the space of eleven minutes into a fitting Blues crescendo. For those wanting more, there is exactly that, with the bonus studio track 'Starting All Over Again' added to the record. It's a strong composition and a fitting conclusion to a very impressive album.

The production is fantastic, the performance is sheer class and the quality of the material is very high. If you like Joe Bonamassa, JS Taylor, Matt Schofield or any similar contemporary Blues players, it would be worth your while dipping into the work of Ben Poole.

James Gaden

BLACK STAR RIDERS – 'THE KILLER INSTINCT' *(Nuclear Blast)* HARD ROCK

Black Star Riders' debut album 'All Hell Breaks Lose' was a well received slab of Hard Rock, with some obvious Thin Lizzy influences courtesy of ex-Lizzy guitarist Scott Gorham. There has been a change after bassist Marc Mendoza's recent departure, the band quickly recruited Robbie Crane, formally of Ratt and Lynch Mob, to fill the role.

Title track 'Killer Instinct' has Ricky Warwick now sounding comfortable with his vocalist position, while Gorham and Damon Johnson exchange guitar leads impressively; that said it's a somewhat subdued song to open the album in my opinion.

'Finest Hour' is the album's best shot at a single, with a subtle guitar groove and punchy chorus that is easy on the ear. The Celtic theme is touched upon during 'Soldierstown' where Warwick's voice is ideally suited and he brings the lyrics to life beautifully. If it was not for the splendid guitar duelling on 'Bullet Blues', it would be an average Warwick solo number – something I felt that's a recurring issue here.

The spirit of the late Phil Lynott is all over 'Charlie I Gotta Go', it's the closest to what TL may have attempted and could easily have been written during the 1975 'Fighting' album. The sombre 'Blindsided' didn't really grab my attention initially although given some time it does creep up on you.

There seems to be a theme of conflict in many of the song titles – 'Sex, Guns & Gasoline' and 'You Little Liar' being good examples; both songs are solid Rockers but lack the real hooks that 'Bound For Glory' and 'Hey Judas' supplied on the debut.

That actually best sums up the album as a whole as 'The Killer Instinct' is a solid Rock album but it's one that lacks some of the excitement of its predecessor.

Ray Paul

BLIND GUARDIAN – 'BEYOND THE RED MIRROR' *(Nuclear Blast)* POWER METAL

Blind Guardian have grown far beyond their early basic Power Metal roots and have turned into one of the best overblown Pomp Metal Titans this planet has to offer. Their new album 'Beyond The Red Mirror' sees the band using TWO full symphony orchestras and THREE choirs to get the sound and depth to the music that they originally envisaged at the writing stage of the project.

This dedication to their music has been the driving force behind this outfit and something that has propelled them ever onward and 'Beyond...' is probably their most dramatic, theatrical and grandiose work so far.

The album itself is a concept that was started some twenty years ago on the album 'Imaginations From The Other Side', where two of that album's songs tell how a young man is drawn towards the magical red mirror and is urged to enter through its portal into a new dimension. The new album deals with what happened to this man and what this new land has in store for him (and for us).

The story centres on an otherworldly dimension that includes gods, tyrants and the Holy Grail. It all begins with the ten minute epic 'The Ninth Wave' where the choirs and orchestra dramatically join with the band in an ever expanding musical sound-scape that weaves and twists until the whole track reaches its overblown climactic end. The band then continue to take us on a flamboyant journey through the land of The Red Mirror, where we encounter the fast paced 'The Twilight Of The Gods', the ominous 'Prophecies' with its memorable chorus, the bombastic one-two attack of 'Ashes Of Eternity' and 'The Holy Grail' which delivers in spades. Finally we come to 'The Grand Parade' another epic song that has multiple time changes, sweeping discordant ideas and musical vistas that you'll want to visit many times.

I have to be honest and say that 'Beyond The Red Mirror' isn't an easy album to fall in love with, even for a long time fan like me. It's a selection of adjoining musical pieces, an Operatic/Classical suite if you will, that needs time and your undivided attention to be enjoyed; dipping into it here and there does nothing for the bands overall vision and in the end that way leaves the listener feeling cheated. Only in a whole serving will you get everything out of the music that the band has poured in but when you do, I think you'll be very pleased indeed.

Ian Johnson

CARE OF NIGHT – 'CONNECTED' *(AOR Heaven)* MELODIC ROCK

Sweden is defined in the dictionary as "a Kingdom in Northern Europe, in the Eastern part of the Scandinavian Peninsula". They should also add to that entry – "that for whatever reason, be it the water, food or climate, also appears to have a factory with a conveyor belt that has the sole purpose of churning out an ever growing line of fantastic sounding Melodic Rock/AOR bands". Once again this factory has created a band that all lovers of anything highly melodic will adore; the band's name is Care Of Night and their album is called 'Connected'.

Subsequently you'll already (I'd imagine) have more than an inkling as to what you're going to hear on this release and for the most part you'd likely be right. Work Of Art, State Of Salazar, Toto, W.E.T. and Journey all spring to mind as you play the album. The questions is does this matter? Basically not a jot because we all know that those acts are wonderful and what makes it all the better is that CON aren't just clones of these band, but instead their music glorifies what is best in all things AOR, which in the end is the music that we all love.

Opening track 'Cassandra' is a perfect example of what I mean; magnificent harmonic vocals, melodies that will make grown men weep and a melodic guitar solo to die for. This sets out the wares of CON perfectly and before it ends you already know that this bunch of Swedish AORsters have everything needed to stand out from the crowd. Then what follows is a master class in how to write, perform and produce catchy, hook-filled and captivating Melodic Rock.

For starters, take a listen to 'Those Words', a track that's catchier than Chicken Pox and one which will pop into your head when you least expect it; I promise you'll be singing its chorus out loud and embarrassing yourself as you do so. There is also the beautifully sincere ballad 'Dividing Lines' with its heartfelt lyrics and Boulevard-like Saxophone break, the intoxicating 'Say A Prayer', the keyboardtastic 'Contact' and the stunning 'Unify' where Calle Schönberg (one of the vocal finds of the last few years) really shows what he's capable of. Last but not least we have the seven minute melodic epic 'Say You Will'; a song that builds slowly from a light acoustic refrain to an all out melodic romp, which really shows that in Care Of Night we have another fantastic – and NEW – AOR group that will hopefully go on from this wonderful start to much bigger and better things.

Summing up this album is easy, I'll use just one word – Buy!

Ian Johnson

BLIND PETITION – 'LAW & ORDER' *(Breaking)* HARD ROCK

Though they've had a forty year existence, I admit this is the first time I have crossed paths with Blind Petition. Formed in Vienna, Austria in 1974, the quintet recorded an album in 1977 but due to financial problems it was never released, but a few of the songs appeared in single versions in 1980. It wasn't until 1987, following a selection of songs appearing on an Austrian Metal sampler album, that debut album 'Welcome To Win' finally arrived.

Since then, another five albums have appeared with the last being 'Bloody Reunion' in 2007, so 'Law & Order' is sort of overdue but a fitting 40th Anniversary release; the re-recording and inclusion of the three early singles 'Blind Petition', 'Highway Devils' and 'Feelin' High' celebrating this fact.

As you would imagine, a band that originated in the glory days of the Seventies have both feet firmly planted in said decade – it's uncompromisingly gutsy, riff-orientated, guitar-based Classic Rock with occasional leanings towards Blues and Southern Rock.

The album does have a tendency to slip into, and rely on, a mid-paced, down 'n' dirty groove a little too often – 'Like Hell', 'People', 'The Score', 'God Of Rock 'N' Roll', 'Down To The Ground', 'How Long', '...High', 'Won't You' and '...Petition' all employing this tactic at some point (which is nine out of the eleven tracks on offer, two or three too many in my opinion); however other listeners may enjoy this particular facet of Blind Petition's sound.

More on the plus side for me is the six-minute title track which begins gently on acoustic before erupting into a great Rocker with big melodies while golden oldie '...Devils' is a Harmonica-riddled, Bluesy romp.

Aside from the tempo limitations that prevent me from totally loving this album, it's a well-performed set of songs with some excellent guitar work and in any case it's great to see a band survive this long in what is essentially a limited market.

Ant Heeks

CHET NICHOLS – 'BAND IN THE BASEMENT' *(Magic Garage)* ROCK

Chet Nichols is an inductee in The Kansas Music Hall Of Fame and much more. Besides music, he is involved in pretty much every part of the entertainment business from being an award-winning creative director to a 3D animation producer.

Regarding his musical side, Nichols is a multi-instrumentalist and has produced eighteen albums to date; the latest one being 'Band In The Basement'. Nichols has also played high profile gigs opening for the likes of John Denver, B.B. King, Jethro Tull, Steve Martin, The Grateful Dead and many others – an impressive and eclectic list.

With this pedigree you would expect a top-drawer output and that's what you get. This album is particularly interesting as it is a retro affair in which he redoes songs he originally wrote for his band The Chosen Few in the 1960s. As a result, the album is a high quality affair of quirky Blues and old time Rock 'N' Roll.

The music styling is certainly old-school and the lyrics are very much of the genre harping back to better times; a good example of this is the opener 'I'm The Ice Cream Man'. The feel of the some of the songs are a bit reminiscent of early Beatles, 'You Made Me Cry' for one. On the other hand there are some down the line Blues on display, best demonstrated on 'I Come From Chicago'. Nichols' voice has an engaging drawl and the emphasis throughout is very much on "good time" music.

Chet Nichols named this album as a dedication to the fact that "so many bands in the 1950s and 1960s started out in someone's basement". What is poignant is so many of his original band members are no longer with us. For this style of music, this is as good as it gets.

Rob McKenzie

CHRIS APPLETON – 'RESTLESS' *(Rocksector)* ROCK

Do you remember when Bruce Dickinson left Iron Maiden all those years ago, stating the band should have followed up 'Seventh Son Of A Seventh Son' with an acoustic album instead of the lacklustre 'No Prayer For The Dying'? Well, if you ever wondered what that unplugged effort might have sounded like, then I suggest you give 'Restless' a listen.

The lead singer and guitarist in Absolva and guitarist in Blaze Bayley's latest band, Chris Appleton, is known for hammering out authentic, rousing U.K. Metal in a vein which Maiden, Judas Priest and Saxon would be proud of. 'Restless' is no different... other than it's purely acoustic. There are still rampaging (although drum-less) rhythms, soaring-rasping vocals and galloping guitars.

However mixed throughout is a feel of melancholy and introspection not often associated with what is, in essence, exactly the sort of fare Appleton does so well. A variety of attacks ensures this short release holds the imagination and yet there's a feel that things can be a little one dimensional, even with Wizz Wizzard (Wizzard) and Iced Earth's Luke Appleton (also Chris's brother and ex-band-mate) adding their weight.

The title track is an instrumental affair of rumbling riffs and surging lead lines, while 'Only When It's Over' sits slow and easy; a superb vocal from Chris Appleton drawing you in. Wizzard takes the mic for the synthed-strings and piano-infused 'Wonders Of The World' and does a decent job on a song which maybe tries too hard to wring emotion from every note, while Luke Appleton adds guitar to the heartfelt 'How Will I Feel When You're Gone'. The album closes with an interesting cover of Ozzy Osbourne's 'Mama I'm Coming Home' which shows a different side to a song which still feels very familiar.

Good though it is, you can't help feeling that most of the songs here are simply crying out to be plugged in and blasted out with force. 'Restless' is an interesting exercise and one pulled off well, however, this is a slow burner rather than a towering inferno and it offers a straight up answer to what happens if you take someone known for Metal Mayhem and hand them an acoustic guitar.

Steven Reid

DEVIL'S TRAIN – 'II' *(earMusic)* HARD ROCK

I became a big fan of Devil's Train when I reviewed their debut album, which was released in 2012. Despite being made up of musicians known mostly from the Power Metal genre, vocalist R.D. Liapakis and guitarist Laki Ragazas (from Mystic Prophecy) teamed up with ex-Stratovarius drummer Jörg Michael and Masterplan bassist Jari Kainulainen to form DT, in order to play Classic Rock firmly in the mold of the glory days of the 1970s, with some 1980s hooks thrown in for good measure.

The second album sees the quartet expand their horizons a little. The boisterous opener 'Down On You' is classic DT, with the heavy but accessible riffs playing over a thumping rhythm section and topped with Liapakis' gruff vocals. However, 'Hollywood Girl' adds more of a 1980's vibe, especially on the chorus, resplendent with some "whoa-oh-oh" parts – if you get chance, check out the excellent video that has been made to accompany it. Remember those great Rock videos where the band performs surrounded by scantily clad women in sunny locations? Yeah, that – it's great!

The band were keen to add a couple of other new elements to their sound, so some songs are certainly heavier – 'You And Me' for example is a real powerhouse track, but all of the cuts on offer retain memorable melodies. DT also wanted to include some Blues in their formula, citing Badlands as an influence, and they achieve that on the swampy-intro to 'Mr. Jones' which then roars into life and stands out as a highlight of the record.

Like the brilliant debut album, every track here is killer and the band have included a couple of covers. First up is a great take on Steppenwolf's 'Born To Be Wild' which the band have truly succeeded in putting their own stamp on. A less likely choice, but equally well executed, is the driving version of Led Zeppelin's 'Immigrant Song' which closes out the copy I have as a bonus track.

If I had to make a list of best debut albums I've heard during my time at Fireworks, DT would definitely be in the top three. As a fan, I'm delighted to state the follow-up successfully adds some new flavours, while still retaining the Devil's Train sound. It's the second excellent Hard Rock release from a superb band well worth your investment.

James Gaden

CICCONE RITCHIE – 'WITHIN OUR PARAMETERS' *(Prime Collective)* MODERN/ALTERNATIVE

Taking their name from the son of Guy Ritchie and Madonna may seem an unusual and humorous move from Copenhagen's Ciccone Ritchie, but their music is a deadly serious blend of Modern Prog Rock and Punk meanderings.

Hammer drums and brash guitar patterns ring true on Punk-ish opener 'Bang Goes Evil' or the more structured 'Dear Ancestry'. Held together by Alan Douches' (The Ramones, Mastodon, Motorhead) sharp mix and the production of the relative unknown Christian Bonde, there's a Progressive quality to the music on offer from the sprinkling of keyboards to the Peter Gabriel-like vocals of Bjarke Madsbøll on the Hard Rock of 'In Ignorance I Trust' or 'Sleep'.

The Prog Rock-isms will either please you or irritate you depending on your persuasion but there's no denying the annoyance of songs like 'Fourdoublesixsixfour' which never really seem to get going; tarnished by the unnecessary drum fills and syncopated nature. '99 Cent Redemption' bucks the trend slightly being a straight ahead Rocker as does 'My Fortress, My Prison' but the songs as a whole simply don't stand up, lacking discernible hooks and the all-important payoff chorus.

Madsbøll does have a decent voice but more often than not the songs appear to make him sound droning and whiney and by track ten 'Liars And Gallows' – a decent enough Hard Rocker – you breathe a sigh of relief that it's all over.

The potential is clearly there on 'Within Our Parameters' but the songs aren't quite up to par, leaving it unmemorable and mediocre.

Mike Newdeck

CORONATUS – 'CANTUS LUCIDUS' *(Massacre)* SYMPHONIC METAL

It's been the best part of twenty years now since Nightwish first broke, twenty years in which a sound that, at the time, seemed to be rather obtuse and quirky has developed into a full-blown phenomenon!

Yes, whatever your thoughts on the whole Female-Fronted Gothic/Symphonic Metal movement, there's no denying that it has grown and expanded immeasurably over the past two decades and shows little sign of not continuing to do so. The downside of course, as with anything that gains meaningful traction, is that it's becoming increasingly difficult for new players to distinguish themselves from their contemporaries, the search for an elusive edge to give you that one vital advantage becomes ever more challenging.

Making full use of not one but two female vocalists as well as composing songs with lyrics in English, Latin and their native German, Coronatus seem to be one of a select bunch who've found that edge.

Formed as long ago as 1999 by drummer Mats Kurth, Coronatus have thus far released five albums of ever more sumptuous Symphonic Metal, the last – 2013's 'Recreatio Carminis' – marking a welcome return for classically-trained Soprano Carmen Lorch. The reception afforded '...Carminis' upon its release was almost universally positive, so in a bid to capitalise on that positivity, the band have been hard at work for most of the past year crafting a worthy follow up.

Opulent, diverse and atmospheric are three adjectives that spring readily to mind as you wrestle with the expertly interwoven complexities of latest opus 'Cantus Lucidus'; their fusion of Gothic/Symphonic Metal, Neo-Classically-infused melodies, Operatic hooks and the odd dollop of Folk is somewhat perplexing... yet at the same time engaging.

This is (perhaps) the closest you'll get to the essence of the original Nightwish sound (helped in no small part by the aforementioned Soprano of Lorch) albeit juxtaposed with plenty of fresh elements. With tracks like the bombastic 'The Elvenwell I Can Give You...' or mood driven 'Deborah', Coronatus paint an intense sonic picture which conjures up vibrant images of an epic land even the creators of 'Game Of Thrones' would be proud of!

Deliciously eloquent, 'Cantus Lucidus' is a rare delicacy for the more discerning palate.

Dave Cockett

CRUIZZEN – 'FREE RIDE' *(Pure Rock)* HARD ROCK

My first impressions of this album 'Free Ride' by Cruizzen were of Brian Johnson era AC/DC, WASP, Judas Priest, Mötley Crüe and Guns 'N' Roses. Sounds incredible right? Wrong. Looking at these bands, were they ever "safe" in their song-writing? What was it that made these bands special? Individuality for starters you could say, talent was definitely another factor.

Now that's not to say Cruizzen have no talent at all because that's not true, but the one thing all the bands mentioned above had in common was they felt their instruments and they felt every note and every beat played. They knew their instruments in and out and knew what they were capable of song-writing and live performance wise. You know that feeling when you get when you listen to their tracks and you just say "fuck yeah... that's awesome!"

It is very hard to replicate that. You can be influenced by it... yes... but to try and literally re-create it is almost impossible. Cruizzen can play of that there is no doubt; Hubert Forster and Michael Hennig are sweet on guitar, their solos are spot on but still something important is missing.

At the beginning of the album, the tracks could be described as very "safe"; 'Soundmaker' is not a win over for a listener. It begs the important questions... when should Rock 'n' Roll be safe? The answer is NEVER! Like the musicians, Alexander Mayer has ability and he certainly has a Johnson-like style but there is no diction to the lyrics, once again that something special is absent and so much is missed.

Dynamics are needed, especially in 'Crazy Dayzz'. What is desired is some unpredictable hesitations, playing and toying with the listener then adding some really cheeky guitar licks from lead guitar.

'Straight Down Dirt' has a Priest-like heartbeat for certain and there are some serious, punchy vocals in the chorus coming from Mayer yet it still fails to move you. Speed brings a life to the album, wakes it up and gives it that bit of texture and this is lacking.

ECLIPSE – 'ARMAGEDDONIZE' *(Frontiers)* HARD ROCK

Erik Mårtensson is fast becoming one of the leading lights of our beloved Melodic Rock genre, amassing an impressive C.V. of work with his writing and production work, let alone his accomplishments as a singer and guitarist. The dust has barely settled on his work with Ammunition (his collaboration with former Wig Wam vocalist Åge Sten Nilsen reviewed elsewhere this issue), yet it's immediately followed by the eagerly anticipated new Eclipse album, surely Mårtensson's primary focus.

In my opinion Eclipse are one of the masters of blending pure Melodic Rock with energetic Heavy Metal, yet coming after the epic majesty of 'Bleed And Scream' my initial impression of 'Armageddonize' is one of slight disappointment. The tunes are more concise and the harder edge of the previous album seems to have been smoothed over in favour of a more melodious approach, more in the vein of the 'Are You Ready To Rock' album and W.E.T.'s 'Rise Up' release (another Mårtensson partnership). Yet upon repeated listens, you realise that the Metallic elements are still very much present, it's just that, impressively, the melodies and choruses are even bigger and stronger than previously and they immediately grab the attention and become the focal point.

Indeed, the opening salvo of 'I Don't Wanna Say I'm Sorry', 'Stand On Your Feet' and 'The Storm' are straight out of the "how to write the perfect Melodic Rock song" book (if such a thing existed), while 'Wide Open' could well be the best chorus you'll hear in 2015. 'Breakdown' is a slight departure for Eclipse, a slide guitar intro gives way to an acoustic-driven stomp (reminiscent of Blue Murder's 'Jelly Roll') before escalating into a commercial groove-laden Rocker that will be fantastic in a live setting. The album's solitary ballad is the wonderful 'Live Like I'm Dying', featuring a soaring vocal from Mårtensson.

Yet Eclipse is not simply the Mårtensson show; guitarist Magnus Henriksson is a vastly underrated talent, just check out his beautiful solo in the intro to the Celtic-tinged 'Blood Enemies', while Magnus Ulfstedt's bubbling bass lines meld seamlessly with drummer Robban Bäck's thunderous rhythms and intricate fills. Needless to say, the production is simply amazing, allowing each and every nuance to be clearly heard.

The heavier tracks appear in the latter half of 'Armageddonize'; 'Love Bites' is constructed around a searing riff, 'One Life – My Life' takes a more contemporary approach with an almost Gothic-sounding piano melody while the closing 'All Died Young' is an all-out pedal-to-the-metal anthem.

There's no denying that Sweden is a hot-bed of talent right now with some amazing bands; Eclipse are right up there with H.e.a.t and deserve to be acknowledged as one of the very best... phenomenal!

Ant Heeks

The 12-bar style that is used within the song structure limits the movement and any progression the musicians have to play around and thus the album itself is limited as is its appeal. Cruizzen can play well as musicians and for that alone... credit is due

But it's just 'Free Ride' as an entity and as an album lacks ambition; it merely mimics the work of past pioneers that has been done a million times over but without that sparkle that made those acts shine brightly.

Lara Kisel

DANKO JONES – 'FIRE MUSIC' *(New Damage)* MODERN/ALTERNATIVE

Another day and another Canadian band releases yet another album, this time it's not a mega platinum-selling Rock band releasing a twee Pop album, (guess who?), it's a proper full-on Rock album resplendent with full-throated vocals, chant-along gang choruses and frenetic riffage.

Do you know who? Well this is Danko Jones' seventh studio album and the two bands have been in existence for approximately the same number of years. That's as far as the similarities go with the two being poles apart musically.

The follow up to 2012's 'Rock And Roll Is Black And Blue' treads familiar ground but that's the great thing about DJ, you know what you're going to get and they deliver.

Rather like Rose Tattoo on speed, DJ grab you by the throat and squeeze tight, never letting go on the revved up 'Gonna Be A Fight Tonight', the frenzied 'The Twisting Knife' or equally vociferous thousand mile an hour 'Watch You Slide' – a manic ode to AC/DC's 'Thunderstruck'.

Although DJ don't really do eclectic, preferring to stick to what they do best, there's a welcome change of pace throughout the album including the Bluesy 'Live Forever', where Jones' (the man) guitar playing adds a new dimension and 'Do You Wanna Rock' a typical groove-orientated song that makes good use of Jones' semi-spoken lyrical delivery.

The combined rhythm section of John Calabrese (bass) and Rich Knox's metronomic drumming put down the perfect framework for Jones' in your face style and yet for all the drive and edge the songs themselves remain melodic and soulful.

'Fire Music' is exactly what fans have come to expect from Danko Jones and with that in mind, it would be the perfect introduction to the band for newbies before the inevitable delving into their back catalogue.

Mike Newdeck

DAVE BAINBRIDGE – 'CELESTIAL FIRE' *(Open Sky)* PROGRESSIVE

Dave Bainbridge is a musician who needs (or should need) no introduction. He is best known for his playing in Iona; he's a guitarist, indeed a multi-instrumentalist, whom many would speak in hushed tones alongside the likes of Steve Hackett, Steve Rothery and Camel's Andy Latimer in the way melody, feel and a wonderful tone inspire and feed his playing.

Surprisingly, this is only his second solo album what with his work with Iona, which seems to be currently on a high plus his various other collaborations. It sees him call on a cast of players almost as long as the list of instruments he plays – not just including the usual array of guitars and keyboards but the mysterious Indian leg bells and beer shaker. Based round Neal Morse collaborators Randy George and Colin Leijenaar who provide a solid rhythm section, the result isn't dissimilar to the vast soundscapes which characterise his main Iona musical outlet.

Combining lengthy epics and shorter pieces, both vocal and instrumental, and delivering an album stretching seventy-five minutes, it's exactly the sort of finely polished musicianship you can expect from Bainbridge and his entourage.

A telling Celtic drone courtesy of the inimitable Troy Donockley drifts across the first few seconds of the record and you can picture that distinctive Bainbridge grin in the immediately familiar warmth of the short but welcoming 'Heavenfield'. The lengthy title track, 'Celestial Fire', gives a flavour of how the extended arrangements work; several different passages over fifteen minutes from melodic lead guitar themes to dreamy vocal sections and swelling atmospheric washes of sound, all led by the contrasting vocals of Damian Wilson and Yvonne Lyon,

Main vocalist Wilson is perhaps at his best on the more Prog-influenced 'I See What I See', all church organ and fleet fingered solo, while the subtle female voices add to the cinematic soundscapes which infuse the album. Closing out with the brief but elegant 'Edge Of Glory' with a quote from David Adam's book of the same name and Martin Nolan's pipes inducing that spine tingling reaction, it encompasses the spiritual and inspirational Celtic influence which runs through his work.

Taking lyrical stimulus from religious writings, the natural world and stories and fables, the self-penned words aided by Debbie Bainbridge and David and Yvonne Lyon, naturally compliment the music in their themes. Dave Bainbridge has talked about 'Celestial Fire' being the album he always wanted to make and a chance to demonstrate his originality alongside the influences of Yes, the Mahavishnu Orchestra, Clannad and Vaughan Williams goes to show that patience is a virtue and all good things come to those who wait.

Mike Ainscoe

DAVE KILMINSTER – 'AND THE TRUTH WILL SET YOU FREE...' *(Killer Guitar)* PROGRESSIVE

One of the best (and most challenging) things about writing reviews for this great magazine is being allocated albums/artists that I've never heard of, and/or would never dream of spending my hard earned (don't laugh) cash on; then, actually discovering that I really like them. Chris Braide and John Wesley's recent releases surprised the hell out of me last year, thus proving my point. Well, here's another gem that has sent my way. Dave Kilminster is an English guitar virtuoso of some repute, whose biography is just as impressive as his musicianship. He is perhaps most recognised for his work with Keith Emerson and, for the past eight years, with Roger Waters on both the 'Dark Side Of The Moon' and 'The Wall' tours. But hold it right there... I know what you're thinking, but Kilminster is not simply a Gilmour sound alike... oh no! This guy has got everything and this, his second solo "Rock" offering, illustrates that.

Joining Kilminster (vocals, guitars) are Pete Riley (drums, percussion) and Phil Williams (bass), and what a triumvirate they are! There are only eight songs, but you won't be disappointed with the sixty minutes on offer. Opener 'Messiah' is topped and tailed by some beautiful acoustic ruminations which envelop intelligent, introspective lyrics and a chorus that introduces Kilminster's powerful, yet controlled, axemanship in such a succinct manner; the implementation of a bona fide string quartet adds even more class. 'Addict' follows, and the sombre slide guitar takes you on a journey through the dark, doom-laden alleyways of inner city licentiousness but don't fear, the chorus offers a haven of beauty and optimism, and the guitar outro is simply sublime.

'Thieves' has a Funky vibe, reminiscent of 'Another Brick In The Wall' with the string quartet making another cameo mid-song. 'Circles' is perhaps the album's most commercial song; again, Kilminster's tranquil vocal delivery is quite beautiful and evokes images of romantic assignations by a roaring log fires (the guitar break immediately reminded me of the Isley Brothers circa 'Summer Breeze'). The acoustic ballad 'Save Me' slows things right down but its delivery is emotionally captivating. 'Cassiopeia' is based on the constellation named after a Greek Queen who boasted of her beauty; that beauty is replicated within the song and its extended guitar solo. The penultimate song 'The Fallen' puts the spotlight on Riley and Williams, who prove their significance with a driving display of rhythmic dexterity. The nine minute 'Stardust' closes the album and is a fusion of 'Dark Side...' and 'Wish You Were Here' Floydisms ... exquisite!

If feeling comfortably numb whilst bathing in sonic serenity is your thing, then this album is for you – impressive!

Dave Crompton

DAYDREAM XI – 'THE GRAND DISGUISE' *(Power Prog)* PROGRESSIVE

I first got a heads up about this Brazilian Prog Metal band when Chris Nelson played them on his 'Switchblade Serenade' radio show on ARFM. Their intricate take on Melodic Progressive Metal sounded good to my ears so I despatched a mail to the band and they kindly sent me their album 'The Grand Disguise'.

After living with it for quite some time I can tell you that they have recorded a wonderfully complex album that has comparisons to Dream Theater, Symphony X, Seventh Wonder and Circus Maximus with bits of Iron Maiden also thrown into the mix. I suspect you'll agree that this bodes well for the songs and it does as they are all performed with an energetic verve and filled with a passionate delivery that always keeps you entertained as you listen.

Opener 'Keeping The Dream Alive' is heavy, powerful and played with a relish that only a young, hungry band can achieve. The musicianship from the band is immediately outstanding and in vocalist and guitarist Tiago Masseti they possess a real talent; his unaccented vocals and powerhouse delivery are one of this album's highlights... amongst many others.

Other tracks to look out for are the classy 'Like Darkness Rules The Night' with its strong melodic harmonies and exceptional bass lines courtesy of Tomás Gonzaga, the in your face assault of 'Watch Me Rise' where bass, drums and guitar all fight for supremacy and the wonderfully melodic 'The Age Of Sadness' where again we hear Masseti putting in a huge, emotional performance.

To finish off there is the album's title track which is DDXI's magnum opus. 'The Grand Disguise' is a twenty-four minute epic that encompasses everything from Heavy Metal to Hard Rock and all things in between. This one song is what this whole album seems to be building towards and as you settle down to listen to it, you'll need to grip the arms of your chair hard as you're in for one hell of a ride. A fast paced, all out guitar assault starts things off, then this segues into a softer vocal refrain, which soon explodes into more overblown Progressive Metal that propels the music ever onwards. The whole band are on fire as this song plays and it beggars belief that you are listening to music from a

EUROPE – 'WAR OF KINGS' *(UDR)* HARD ROCK

Like a fine wine that gets better with age, Europe come back to the album table with perhaps their most mature sounding record to date. Of all the Rock bands that have reformed after seemingly being a spent force, Europe undoubtedly have greater relevance than ever before. In a musical climate that sees declining album sales and heralds the death of the long player and CD album format, Europe see fit to release their tenth work of art and fly in the face of the naysayers.

'War Of Kings' as an album title is a fierce statement that resonates throughout the Rock community and the brooding title track is the opening song that harks back to the sound of their first two albums, with John Norum's guitar tone and the chorus reminding the listener of where it all started; Norum's riffs typically building on the same fluid lines as Michael Schenker circa-UFO. In fact the Deep Purple, Led Zeppelin, Thin Lizzy and Schenker references of their heroes are abound and with Joey Tempest and Norum really allowing their Blues roots to flourish, there's no mistaking there is a classic 1970's British feel permeating throughout the grooves, riffs and tones of this wonderful release.

With no press release Europe let the music do the talking. 'Hole In My Pocket' is a heavy Rocker with the main riff echoing Lizzy with a variation on 'Killer On The Loose'. 'Praise You' doffs its metaphorical hat to Purple with Mic Michaeli's Hammond and Ian Haughland's use of the hi-hat alongside Norum's understated guitar tone. Tempest even teases us with a touch of David Coverdale towards the end. The Zeppelin-influenced 'Rainbow Bridge' is Europe's mini 'Kashmir'.

Elsewhere 'Nothin To Ya' sees Norum borrow his own riff from 'Mojito Girl' with a quite glorious chorus – one of their best – and a passionate vocal from Tempest. 'California 405', punctuated by Hammond and heavy riffs, is an ode to the major north-south Californian Interstate highway. The ballad 'Angels (With Broken Hearts)' again has touches of Purple whilst 'Days Of Rock 'N' Roll' is a bouncy sing-along number that I'm sure will be a great live hit with Norum conjuring up some tasty licks and Tempest in typical story-telling mode.

Full of sumptuous solos, terrific drumming from Haughland, and solid bass as ever from John Leven, along with Michaeli's keys becoming more prominent and Tempest singing his heart out (whilst invoking his inner Robert Plant with the stunningly powerful 'Children Of The Mind' – another corker similar to 'Doghouse' from the previous 'Bag Of Bones' album), Europe have hit us with a superb album that should see the "sold out" signs littered across their forthcoming World tour!

Carl Buxton

young band's debut album.

As first albums go this one is pretty impressive and Daydream XI are definitely a band to watch out for in the future. For fans of hard-edged Melodic Prog Metal, I have no hesitation in saying you need to investigate this album.

Ian Johnson

DEADLINE – 'FIRE INSIDE' *(Bad Reputation)* HARD ROCK

I could probably count the number of French Rock bands I know on one hand, but that's exactly where Deadline are from and 'Fire Inside' is their debut album. They play unashamedly eighties-influenced Hard Rock and write songs in an anthemic fashion. On my first playback of the album, I quickly noticed a similarity in vocalist Arnaud Restoueix's singing style and found myself noting it more and more to that of Klaus Meine (Scorpions). Strong accents can sometimes ruin bands, especially those where English isn't their first language, but Restoueix doesn't have an accent in his singing (or at least not prominently to my ears), however those similarities to Meine crop up frequently.

Their Hard Rock sound has a very guitar-heavy groove that is very much reminiscent of the Scorpions, especially their early eighties output, so I'm confident Scorpions fans will click with this album. Within the driven guitar swagger and the song-writing structure you can also hear trace elements of Scottish Rockers Gun; this is most apparent on a certain couple of songs with prominent vocal harmonies.

Restoueix is not the greatest singer in the world but his vocal style sits very well with the aforementioned swagger and groove that this album possesses. In the main '...Inside' is quite an enjoyable collection of Hard Rock offerings and outside of one or two borderline fillers, there is not a lot to pick fault with.

I don't want to be overly harsh or critical as it is essentially a cool and promising debut album from these French newbie's, but if I was to pick a negative, I feel the songs have no lasting power. Yes, they are an enjoyable ride and the energy does get you Rocking out, but as soon as the music stops it is quickly forgettable and I don't find myself returning to '... Inside' for repeat playbacks. However, don't let this put you off if you're into your anthemic Hard Rock, it is just a personal observation and I'm sure many will disagree.

Back on the positive side, it's the guitar riffs that impressed me the most and got me into the songs. There is some cracking, swaggering axe work throughout the album that gets you into the groove along with them. Although it's the chunky riffs that dominate the majority of the album, my favourite song 'No Glory' actually contains some really beautiful guitar licks and coupled with an anthemic chorus, a real album stand out.

Although 'Fire Inside' didn't completely bowl me over, Deadline are well worth investigating and these guys should go down well at a party!

Paul Woodward

DEFINITION OF MADMEN – 'EVIL LULLABIES' *(Aunt Ricky)* MODERN/ALTERNATIVE

These Dutch Rockers have put together their debut album with a whole host of influences, ranging from Led Zeppelin to Queens Of The Stone Age.

Things kick off in a slow and dirty manner, as the band tap into a Rocking vibe, not unlike Soundgarden, with their song 'Common Sense'. 'Shut Down, Left Out And Broken' has an agonizingly-slow and turgid guitar riff and the song runs out of gas far too early to keep your interest.

Thankfully 'Not My Way' has a more upbeat Rock 'n' Roll delivery and gives a much need kick up the arse to proceedings. With buzz-saw guitar courtesy of Lars Koetsier, we launch into 'Don't Fake It', which at least stretches out beyond previous offerings with a chorus that is strong and it really is a diamond in the rough!

Unfortunately 'Beyond The Moon' and 'Hands Of Time' slip back into the Grunge-infested sound of the flannel shirt brigade, which all but cripples the band due to their lack of vision.

Alice In Chains has a real influence on 'The One Thing' with its distinctive vocal arrangement and 'Faders Up' is a hard, leather-clad, traditional Rocker.

If you love dirty Blues Rock with a hard edge, and you are not looking for too much depth to your music, then Definition Of Madmen won't disappoint.

Ray Paul

DIABLO BLVD – 'FOLLOW THE DEADLIGHTS' *(Nuclear Blast)* HARD ROCK

Formed in 2005, Diablo Blvd are from Belgium and are named after a Corrosion Of Conformity song. This is the bands' third release and could well be the one to put them firmly on the map. The music is darkly seductive with a commercial edge, and this is what makes DB stand out from the competition.

Imagine Glen Danzig fronting something like a lighter Pantera and you have the blueprint for 'Beyond The Veil'. The guitars chug alongside the gut-bucket bass guitar while vocalist Alex Agnew displays a truly commanding voice.

The intricate vocal harmonies and complex guitar work make 'Rise Like Lions' a mini, Gothic Metal epic followed by a delicious slice of Hard Rock/Speed Metal that combines well in 'Get Up 9' which simply tears out of the speakers in an old-school style.

The influence of Type O Negative stains the title track 'Follow The Deadlights', the song creeps and slithers like a deadly fog, before descending on its victim. Whereas hook-laden Groove Metal best describes 'Son Of Cain', the vocals carry a melody of evil intent mixed with some emotionally charged power.

'We Are Legion' has a feverish atmosphere, that is only cut apart by the razor sharp guitar work from Andries Beckers and Dave Hubrechts whilst 'End Of Time' has a Eastern-influence with a super-charged Metal approach, not dissimilar to Primal Fear.

In short, this is a strikingly accomplished release with a real Metal bite.

Ray Paul

DIRTY PASSION – 'DIRTY PASSION' *(Denomination)* HARD ROCK

In case you aren't sure where Dirty Passion are from, they slap it right on the album cover, where it proudly states 'Malmo, Sweden', which is a brave move if you're shit because people can track you down and wee in your letterbox. Luckily, DP aren't at all crap so we can just go there and shake their collective hand instead.

As is evident from the name, DP are a sleazy bunch and one of those bands who wait until their third album to break out the self-titled shtick. Maybe they want to see this as a fresh start, and it certainly works as a starting point for all things dirty and passionate. They start off well, as opening track 'Hallelujah' is a raucous, catchy sing-along track that will insert itself in your brain for the rest of the day within minutes. There's a wonderful energy about the band that continues right throughout the album, with each track going for the jugular with pinpoint accuracy.

There's nothing too deep or meaningful (no surprise) about their lyrics but if you just want upbeat, catchy, music that's well played and well sung then you can do far worse than this. Dirty Passion encapsulates everything that can be good about Sleazy Rock, and whilst the album isn't any sort of masterpiece, it does everything it sets out to do and with some style.

Alan Holloway

DIRTY THRILLS – 'DIRTY THRILLS' *(Independent)* HARD ROCK

The band Dirty Thrills, and this their debut album, delivers exactly what it says on the tin. Guitarist Jack Fawdy opens up in 'No Resolve' with intimate, groovy riffs, quickly establishing the band's smouldering yet electric trademark sound. Vocalist Louis James (son of ex-Moody Blues singer Nicky James) bursts into his range, with confidence, breaking out smooth crescendos as the guitar picks up pace, providing a great tempo contrast. James has the ultimate sultry but commanding vocal style; he glosses over notes instead of hitting them, giving a Bluesy but laid-back feel to the vocals.

This band is not afraid to break out variety from every direction and they pull it off stunningly. 'Burning Bridges' shows James can croon as well as sing while 'Rock 'N' Roll' has the genre groove through and through, cheekiness matched with effortless flair. 'Is This Home' slows the album down momentarily, blending raw choruses with paired down verses. The backing vocals on 'Reign' kick this band up to the next notch before the rhythm section really delivers on some dirty texture underneath the solo.

It's almost as if the band's stylish presentation has a sort of dirt smeared across it, giving it that edge and smouldering electricity that is lacking from so much of today's music. Some tracks perhaps lack the clear-cut structure that gives listeners a bit more direction but the music is catchy and enjoyable nonetheless. The influence of the 1970s rings out right to the album's conclusion with 'Sigh' which rapidly picks up the pace, closing DT's debut with a neat and punchy flourish.

Dirty Thrills is infectious, soulful and there's something so light-hearted about it all; it's edged with attitude and delivered with flair and this has to be one of the top albums to come out of 2014 (even if the review now arrives in 2015).

Sophie Brownlee

DREADFUL MINDS – 'LOVE|HATE|LIES' *(Phonector)* HEAVY METAL

Germany's Dreadful Minds have been together for approximately ten years with 'Love, Hate, Lies' being what one might class as their official debut album. Nine of the songs, however, date back to the band's last album, 2005's 'Broken' (their promo sheet stated this was never released due to the perennial "musical differences" and a six year hiatus subsequently ensued). It has to be said that this sounds more like the third or fourth album by the band as the quality and maturity of the song-writing, combined with the musicianship and production, is more of what would be expected from seasoned veterans. At just under sixty-five minutes and fourteen songs, some may consider the album to be a tad too long;

however, there is no filler. We have fourteen tracks that all fall neatly within the genres of Melodic, Progressive and Power Metal.

This is another independent album that has a great production, courtesy of the band themselves, notably the phenomenal drumming of André Tischler, proving once again that a massive budget is not always required. The album was mixed and mastered at the Kohlekeller-Studios in Seeheim-Jugenheim. Although the majority of the songs are Metal in their origins, the keyboards, courtesy of Uli Schlegel, are integral to the overall Dreadful Minds sound. The twin guitars of Christian Wolf and Rainer Weckbach produce a wall of melodic sound but not the traditional twin-pronged attack a la Judas Priest. Bass duties are handled by Jens Freudenberg and the wonderful, warm vocals come courtesy of Holger Weckbach.

The album kicks off with 'The Growing Fear' and the next thirteen tracks follow a similar pattern; that said, the varying change of pace within each song prevents the album ever becoming monotonous. On the first few listens, the album does sound very similar throughout but repeated plays reveal multi-facetted nuances within each of the well crafted songs, whether it be the menacing Metallic riff within 'What U Give Is What U Get', the beautiful piano intro of 'Edge Of Sanity', the terrific solos and drumming on 'Silent Tears', the HIM-like intro to 'Changing Memories', the heavy riff of 'Lost My Heart' or the straight ahead Rock of 'Left' with its infectious chorus.

The oldest song on the album is the re-recorded 'Caught In Illusion', from the band's first demo, that brings to mind early Queensrÿche and demonstrates the quality of the band's song-writing from the very beginning. The four new songs 'Your Love Was A Lie', 'Breaking Circles', 'Left' and 'Reborn' fit seamlessly with the older ones with '...Circles' being the highlight.

Hopefully, 'Love, Hate, Lies' will reach a wider audience than its ill-fated predecessor which is what this music deserves.

Mark Donnelly

EARTH TO ASHES – 'CURSE INVOKED' *(Iron Taco)* PROGRESSIVE

Earth To Ashes is an American four-piece based in Portland, OR who formed in 2010 and have previously released a couple of EPs with 'Curse Invoked' being their debut long player, it also happens to be a concept album. The story is about an ancient curse that has power over mankind and is loosely based on the legend that God cursed the spear of the Roman soldier Longinus after he thrust it into the side of Jesus as he hung from the cross. The main character of the story is Fritz who, in present day America, is a serial killer and often reminds the listener of an 'Operation Mindcrime' ideology – he was coerced into his actions by voices in his head.

The album starts off with a 'Prologue' – a high pitched female voice talking /singing over an acoustic guitar. 'Blood And Water' then smashes out of the speakers armed with twin lead guitars a la Iron Maiden courtesy of co-founder Matt Dorado and Oregon native Larry Massengale; Mark Raney provides some powerful drumming on the track. 'St Longinus' has vocals in a style of Paul Stanley meets Bruce Dickinson, although I'm not sure whether it is Dorado or bassist Angelo Jensen singing on this number as they share vocals throughout the album.

'Relic', at almost nine minutes, is the longest track on the album and it has more of a Progressive Metal feel to it with some fine bass playing from Jensen and numerous chord changes and lengthy twin lead guitar duels that are reminiscent of late 1980's Maiden. 'Mournblade' starts off in a melancholic style similar to Metallica's 'Nothing Else Matters' and features a blistering guitar solo. 'I Hear Cryptic Voices' contains a monstrous riff and vocals from both Dorado and Jensen (who incidentally co-wrote all the songs).

'Basking In Bloodlight' is a heavy number with flurries of lead guitar throughout and riff-wise comes across as a hybrid of Maiden's 'Sanctuary' and UFO's 'Lights Outs'. Alternatively 'The Window' is a mellow acoustic tune, however in the context of the story, Fritz is about to commit an atrocity and this leads nicely (?) into 'She Sees Me' which is also an acoustic number. 'Chased By The Chair' is a Rockier number in the vein of Kiss and the album finishes with 'Till Next Life' which appropriately sounds like Queensryche during their '…Mindcrime' period.

The production is a little raw here and there; however, given their budget Earth To Ashes have done a decent job and musically produced a very interesting album.

Az Chaudhry

H.E.A.T – 'LIVE IN LONDON' *(earMUSIC)* HARD ROCK

Recorded in London at Islington's Garage in May 2014 and produced by Grammy award winner Tobias Lindell, this is the closest thing you'll get to actually being there. Over sixty minutes and fifteen tracks, H.e.a.t melodically melt the faces of the audience and prove that they have what it takes to be not only a rising, but an enduring force within the world's Melodic Rock genre.

These young Swedes have progressed through several singers, and the departure of guitarist Dave Dalone, to be one of the best live bands around with an energy and enthusiasm which hasn't been seen for a long time. Honed to perfection, this five-piece is now a band to be reckoned with, both on record and within the live arena. Eric Rivers has managed to excel as a guitarist since Dalone's departure and the sound is in no way lacking without a second guitarist. Obviously, the band's musical leader Jona Tee is now more to the forefront, but again, the sound isn't overshadowed by him. With the backbone of bassist Jimmy Jay and drummer Crash (a man far too handsome for his own good), they really have found their stride.

After the show, apparently the band weren't particularly happy with their performance due to some on-stage technical issues, but when they listened back to the recording, they were astounded by just how little post production needed to be done.

The set draws on H.e.a.t's four studio albums and Erik Gronwall is well and truly at the helm now, allaying any fears that a TV talent show winner would struggle to be a Rock star.

With a track listing as follows – 'Point Of No Return', 'A Shot At Redemption', 'Better Off Alone', '1000 Miles', 'It's All About Tonight', 'Inferno', 'The Wreckoning/ Tearing Down The Walls', 'Mannequin Show', 'Late Nite Lady', 'In And Out Of Trouble', 'Downtown', 'Enemy In Me', 'Emergency', 'Breaking The Silence', and 'Living On The Run' – it is about as good a set as I've ever seen them do, although 'Beg, Beg, Beg' would've been the icing on the cake for me.

With a wealth of festival appearances planned for this coming summer, there can honestly be no better way to prepare than to listen to this album full blast... on a daily basis! In summary, basically, this is one of the best live albums I've ever heard.

Sue Ashcroft

EB11 – 'ENJOY THE RIDE' *(Independent)* MODERN/ALTERNATIVE

EB11 started out as a solo project and was the brainchild of singer/guitarist Eber Pitrelli. He eventually found himself in the position of being able to perform live and needed a band around him to fulfill those ambitions. Hailing from Tenerife in Spain and now consisting of Pitrelli, Manuel Conti (drums), Joaquin Tulian (guitar) and Alberto Delgado (bass), 'Enjoy The Ride' follows an EP ('She') and a full-length debut entitled 'D.I.Y.' that was only available to buy at their shows.

The band's style is a quirky take on Modern Rock with some Punk elements embedded in the attitude and song pacing. The opening one/two of 'All Is Fake' and 'System Breakdown' mixes an angsty vibe alongside crunching riffs, the material bolstered by a powerful bottom end to enhance the overall impact. Moments of subtlety appear during the likes of 'To Make It Real' and 'Hold Me' (a ballad of sorts) yet the overall feel is rather downbeat, influenced by some relationship-based lyrics. 'Be The One' is reminiscent of Wheatus in both song structure and style but is also one of several occasions where Pitrelli's vocals are a little on the thin side. It is nice to hear solos during a number of the songs and in fact the guitars are impressive and feature highly throughout.

At fourteen songs it is possibly two or three too many despite a running time of less than fifty minutes. There were no writing credits included with the copy I received but I'm guessing everything was written "in house". Production values are good for an independent release and the mix allows for nice separation and clarity. The bass is pushed forward during a couple of songs ('D.I.Y.' being a good example) and the overall feel is of a band playing live in the studio.

'Enjoy The Ride' will not set the world on fire but it is by no means a bad album. I just feel there needs to be a step up in song-writing to raise the band's profile and for them achieve more exposure.

Dave Bott

EYESBERG – 'BLUE' *(Progressive Promotion)* PROGRESSIVE

Eyesberg were/are a U.K./German Progressive Rock band that formed over thirty years ago at the tail end of the 1970s. The band featured Georg Alfter, Michael Buchner, Thomas Klarmann (of Argos and Superdrama), Norbert Podien and Malcolm Shuttleworth. These five men decided (at that time) to write and record an album influenced by the British Progressive/Art Rock bands of mid to late 1970s but even though the song-writing sessions went well, the five men went their separate ways and Eyesberg never recorded their album.

Thirty years later, the band decided to reform and finally record the music written during the original sessions all those years ago. So on 'Blue', you'll actually find twelve songs written back in the very late 1970s and very early 1980s, all of which now have brand new lyrics added courtesy of Shuttleworth and new music re-worked, and in many places re-written, by Alfter, Podien and Shuttleworth for our delectation.

So has the thirty odd year gap been kind to the band and its music? I'd say yes but that, I suppose, depends on your point of view and how much you like Genesis because that's what you get on this album; music that takes a lot of its cues from the early Genesis albums but with the new re-workings adding a Neo-Prog feel.

Opener 'Child's Play' is a Prog fans wet dream; layer upon layer of keyboards drench the song in beautiful synth rhythms and Shuttleworth's Peter Gabriel-esque vocals usher in the sound of an era long gone. The band then continue to entertain us with songs like the cool, swaggering 'Epitaph' which again utilises multiple keyboard harmonies and this time around employs a superb, melodious flute solo, the beautiful 'Winter Gone' where Shuttleworth puts in a wonderful vocal performance, 'Inquisitive' with its catchy keyboard hook, clever arrangements and more flute, the Rocking 'Porcelian' and closing track 'Detachment And Replacement' which is heavier and more guitar-orientated than the rest of the album but works nonetheless. Each one of these tracks are worthy of your attention.

Thirty years might have gone by since Eyesberg first thought of recording this album but that doesn't matter as I've really enjoyed listening to it a lot. Hopefully with a release as strong as this one under their belts, it won't take them thirty more years to make album number two.

For fans of both Retro and Neo Prog, this will be right up your street.

Ian Johnson

FLAYED – 'SYMPHONY FOR THE FLAYED' *(Klonosphere)* HARD ROCK

A French six-spice, Flayed are about one thing and one thing only – ROCK! Even on their website they proudly state "Rock or die" which is as admirable as it is a cliché. Nevertheless, their intentions are clear and their album 'Symphony For The Flayed' looks to do exactly what it says on the tin.

Formed around guitarist Julien's collection of songs and riffs, the musicians invited by the six-stringer to bring the ideas and tracks to life became immersed in what they were doing and suddenly a band was born. Things picked up steam when Flayed landed a support slot for Orange Goblin and after being featured on French show 'Une Dose Of Metal' (I was delighted my French was good enough to know that means 'A Dose Of Metal') the group set about recording their debut album.

They make no bones about their influences being AC/DC, Deep Purple and Black Sabbath and the Purple reference is quite obvious from the organ intro and guitar work on 'Sweet Coverage', which also has hints of old-school Whitesnake. 'Old Manners' is a frantic head-banger of a track, and the abrasive vocals of bass player and lead singer Bertrandt reminds me of Hinder's Austin Winkler at times.

Many of the songs have a familiar feel, with their clear adaptions of Purple template especially, with to the organ being an integral part to many of the tracks, but the riffing and vocals keep things contemporary enough to stop this being completely retro.

Sometimes things get a bit much – 'Son Of Sickness' virtually becomes white noise in the

middle section with so much going on, but mostly the songs are energetic, with decent riffs and solid performances. The title track is one of the best on offer with a Blues stomp about it and an organ solo that could almost be The Doors. This change-up to the otherwise relentless assault of Rockers is welcome, for Flayed are not a band who do ballads.

A decent debut for sure, with an old-school production and one foot firmly in the past with the other ready to take a step forward. Not the greatest debut I've ever heard, but certainly one with some promise.

James Gaden

FM – 'NEARFEST 2006' *(Esoteric Antenna)* PROGRESSIVE

Despite a sporadic recording career spanning four decades and links to fellow Canadians Rush, it's still necessary to preface any mention of eclectic Prog Rockers FM with the words "not to be confused with the British AOR band of the same name". On the back of last year's excellent re-issues by U.K. label Esoteric/Antenna comes this CD/DVD set from a rare show in the U.S.A. at the prestigious Nearfest in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania; their first outside of Canada since their seventies heyday.

Original members Martin Deller and Cameron Hawkins have always collaborated with the violins and electric mandolins of Nash The Slash or Ben Mink, but with the mysterious and now sadly deceased Nash not interested at the time, and Mink having gone on to a successful career as writer and producer with the likes of K.D. Lang, Heart and Geddy Lee, new member Claudio Vena acquits himself superbly on a set of classics along with a couple of mouth-watering, as yet unrecorded tunes.

Complex songs with catchy hooks and great musicianship are the order of the day; with the synth-tastic 'Phasors On Stun', the rhythmic 'One O'Clock Tomorrow', the instrumental 'Slaughter In Robot Village' and the intense title-track 'Black Noise' amongst the lion's share of their iconic 1977 album. These are all performed brilliantly with Hawkins' Geddy Lee-like control of bass, keyboards and vocals all at once and Deller's amazing percussion. Kudos must go to Vena for not only staying faithful to the original violin and mandolin parts, but also bringing his own unique vitality to the table. His work on the opening instrumental 'Planet Vega' and the multi-paced 'Trial By Fire' showing where the band could have gone if they'd ever gotten around to making an album with this line-up. The band show their Pop leanings with their version of the classic 'Shapes Of Things' and their instrumental prowess with the frantic 'Sofa Back', but it's the encore and sole offering from 1980's 'City Of Fear' album, 'Surface To Air', that perhaps gets the juices flowing the most.

To be honest I wasn't expecting much from the DVD section, especially after the debacle that was the "enhanced" section of their last live CD from 1994, but it's a big, well-lit stage and everything can be seen perfectly. With everyone multi-tasking they aren't really a visual band, but seeing those songs played with dexterity and passion has made even the quick fire jumps from camera to camera not as annoying as it should be.

There are many bands who should have had more success than they achieved, and 'Nearfest 2006' amply demonstrates one of the most worthy.

Phil Ashcroft

FOREST FIELD – 'ONWARDS AND UPWARDS' *(Independent)* PROGRESSIVE

Forest Field is the brainchild of multi-instrumentalist Peter Cox and this album covers a number of styles under the broad church of Progressive Rock.

Cox has created a fifty-fifty split between instrumentals and songs; the former being the odd numbered tracks and songs with vocals being the even numbers. This by definition shakes things up a bit; the first track (an instrumental of course) entitled 'Onwards' is a piano study but the rest of the instrumentals are quirky electronic offerings.

The vocal-based songs work well such as 'Stronger' with impressive vocals from Phil Vincent (Legion, Tragik) and a powerful and memorable chorus. On the other hand some of the tracks lack a convincing beat; Cox takes on drum duties throughout and I suspect having a specialist drummer would have paid dividends. He certainly can play the guitar though and has a distinctive tone to his solos.

This is an interesting album and has a nice overall retro feel.

Rob McKenzie

FORTRESS UNDER SIEGE (FT HANNIBAL) – 'PHOENIX RISING' *(Steel Gallery)* PROGRESSIVE

Literally rising from the ashes of Heavy Metallers Gladiator over a decade ago, Fortress Under Siege stood as one of the leading lights in the Greek Rock and Metal scene. The almost obligatory split (1998) followed by the reformation (2010) resulted in the long awaited debut release and despite line-up changes in the vocal department, they've managed to hold it together to prepare and release their sophomore album.

'Phoenix Rising' comes across as an album which clearly fits toward the harder-edged end of the spectrum of Melodic Rock whilst also veering more towards the AOR area with the guitar/bass/drum holy trinity being supplemented by George Georgiou's keyboard. His touches provide a pleasantly harmonious wash behind the band and get the occasional chance to break free and come to the fore – listen out for a flying synth solo in 'A Martyr's Death' and some of what Marillion's Mark Kelly used to call "widdly widdly" bits at the start of 'Hate What We Like'.

Fotis Sotripoulos on guitar is clearly the driving force and gives the band its distinctive sound, delivering chunky chords and some nicely toned lead lines and solos which are easy on the ear, while new vocalist Alex "Hannibal" Balakakis has fit most comfortably and confidently in the musical stylings of the band. Not that he isn't his own man but the "air raid siren" wails of Bruce Dickinson spring to mind as a reference point.

'Phoenix Rising' delivers a series of five minute Rock songs which are competent and striking, fitting into the Melodic Rock standard without over stretching or pushing themselves into more challenging areas. In 'Eagles Fly Forever' the stomping rhythm is highly reminiscent of Led Zeppelin's 'Kashmir' before heading into typically tuneful chorus mode and is perhaps the pick of the set for being a track which not so much breaks the mould but gives it a gentle squeeze.

The album title has proved quite prophetic in that the music has emerged from a long period of inactivity when the band was very much long forgotten. Kudos to Fortress Under Siege for their persistence and producing quite a worthy comeback which is satisfying and ticks all the right boxes without breaking any barriers.

Mike Ainscoe

ISSA – 'CROSSFIRE' *(Frontiers)* MELODIC ROCK

My jaw bounced off the floor with such velocity and ricocheted back so hard it almost took my head off the first time I heard this album. I am honestly in love with it and in my opinion it really doesn't get much better than this for Melodic Rock fans. If this isn't my album of the year then – hell who I am kidding... this will be my album of the year, as to me, it is honestly THAT awesome.

I've always thought of Issa as an amazing and extremely talented singer and enjoyed her previous three albums, but not every song truly moved me... well, other than the ones she wrote with the Martin brothers (Vega). For me this album's Soft Rock route suits her vocal style far better and I'm glad she has moved more pro actively in this direction as it really does showcase her vocal abilities to their best. Another thing that helps is that she wrote the entire album with the Martin brothers so the album's flow is more consistent. On top of this she seems more invested in the songs personally and this album features her most evocative and emotional vocals to date. The emotion she shows really drew me in and intensified my own emotional attachment to the tracks. I was blown away the first time I heard the chorus to 'Only You'; it's a tour-de-force vocal performance from the Norwegian songstress that made me cry and smile in the same song!

There is not a single track on this album I do not like due to the fact that, for me, they are sheer joyous Melodic Rock perfection. James Martin's keys are out of this world and there are so many amazing infectious keyboard moments and hooks, it's hard to single any out. And whilst the album does veer to the softer, borderline Pop side of Rock, the guitars that Tom Martin has laid down are hook-filled and deliciously melodic. From start to end all the songs are instant and get stuck in your head and you will be playing this album over and over enjoying all the lush and smooth melodies, majestic keyboards and of course Issa's spine tingling emotive vocals again and again.

Another big thing for me is the lyrics; I absolutely adore the lyrical style and they have a beauty all of their own that further adds to the album. The lyrics really hit the spot and with the passion and emotion in Issa's vocals they resonated even more intensely. This honestly is my taste in music to a tee! Heavenly Soft Rock goodness!

This album is awesome, stop reading... go buy... don't thank me, knowing you're smiling is enough!

Paul Woodward

FREDDY AND THE PHANTOMS – 'TIMES OF DIVISION' *(Target)* HARD ROCK

One of the big joys of reviewing is that every now and then a band you've never heard of lands in your inbox and knocks you out; Freddy And The Phantoms is definitely one such band. From the name you may well (as I did) expect a slightly Rockabilly-based genre, and you'd be very wrong as this is one of the best retro Blues Rock albums I have heard. It's always difficult to describe a musical style in a written review without referencing other bands so that the reader can get an idea of where a band is coming from, but if you like Deep Purple, Rival Sons and Joe Bonamassa then this will likely get your juices going.

Title track 'Times Of Division' is pacy and introduces Frederik Schnoor's very rich distinctive vocals and the wonderful droning Hammond Organ, the distinguishing sound of so many Classic Rock albums (with Purple's being probably some of the most famous); it provides a wonderfully fat background. 'Borderline Blues' also brings in the harp, another sound I love in Blues Rock. 'On The Sidewalk' is punchy and will have you air drumming at the traffic lights and on 'Down, Down, Down' Anders Haarh's Hammond-fills will have you stabbing out air keyboards.

'In The Attic' is driven by Mads Wilkens brooding and moody bass. 'No One To Blame' is probably the most retro with its dances and skips, there's so much going on worthy of note it's hard to know where to start, you'll just have to listen for yourself. The Clapton-esque 'Storm On The Riverside' has some searingly soulful guitar and is an arena-worthy song whilst 'No Time' is ramped with fuzz-laden guitars raunching it up to the max.

There are no real ballads on this album but 'Sinking Ship' is a slow paced treasure that will surely become a lighter waving favourite in their set. The wonderful overdriven Hammond brings in the album closer 'Morning Sun' which has a Crosby Stills & Nash vibe to it.

I won't be getting this album out of my player any time soon, I'm a sucker for a Hammond and thrown in some harp and I'm there. There are times when the songs sound vaguely familiar, they could almost be "long lost" tracks from better known bands, but that's a reflection of their musical quality rather than plagiarism. They have captured the musical tone of the period to perfection with Schnoor's vocals bringing a whole lot of class. If they expand their touring outside of Denmark, I have a very strong feeling that Freddy And The Phantoms will soon be a name on everyone lips.

Helen Bradley Owers

FURYON – 'LOST SALVATION' *(Dream/Cargo)* HARD ROCK

Brighton-based Furyon debuted with the awesome 'Gravitas' album in 2010, initially self-released but subsequently issued via Frontiers in 2012. It garnered an impressive reputation, assisted by associations with Metal Hammer and Classic Rock magazines, yet distribution complications prevented the album from amassing the sales figures it deserved. 2015 sees a new partnership with Dream and Cargo Records for the delivery of sophomore effort 'Lost Salvation', with acclaimed producer Rick Beato once again behind the mixing desk. Is there a "difficult second album syndrome"? Not a chance…

Still consisting of the trio of Matt Mitchell (vocals), Lee Farmery (drums) and Alex "Nickel" Bowen (bass), original guitarist Chris Green (now with Tyketto and Rubicon Cross) left the band in 2013 but subsequently returned to the fold temporarily to co-write and record the album and has now been permanently replaced by newcomers Luca Faraone and Tiago Rosado. I've never made a secret of the fact I believe Green is the best guitarist on the planet and his contribution to '...Salvation' is nothing short of mesmerising, with some amazing riff-work and jaw-dropping solos, but I am looking forward to hearing how his

replacements will interpret his style in a live setting. Mitchell has developed a stunning vocal range, from a deep bellow to a higher-pitched screaming style, a far cry from the laid-back breathy style he employed back in the days of Pride, while the Bowen/Farmery rhythm section is a joy to behold.

A Furyon album is not a quick fix, something vocalist Mitchell attests to, but the benefits for the commitment required are oh so rewarding. Being Britain's answer to Alter Bridge, they present a grooving Contemporary Metal style that incorporates elements of Prog and Grunge, with choruses that don't instantly jump out at you but creep up and assault you when least expected. The eight-minute epics that were a highlight of 'Gravitas' have been renounced in favour of shorter, more concise numbers – only the grinding Grunge of 'Scapegoat' passes the six-minute mark. 'Lost Salvation', 'Good Sky' and 'Wiseman' leap out with their higher tempos, while the more introspective 'All That I Have', 'These Four Walls', 'Resurrect Me', 'Left It With The Gods' and 'Dematerialize' represent the band's more groove-orientated output.

Furyon are not the type of band that I usually listen to, but there's something I find so irresistible about them. Not only are they extremely talented, they're also a bunch of top geezers who will melt your face off while on stage but then have a pint with you in the bar afterwards... as long as you're paying of course. Even at this early stage of the year I have a distinct contender for album of the year. Absolutely stunning.

Ant Heeks

FUTURE SHOCK – 'LIVE FOR TODAY' *(Independent)* HARD ROCK

Future Shock is a relatively new band from London, with 'Live For Today' being their debut album, but behind each of these musicians is a wealth of gigging and recording experience with original and tribute acts alike, with this their newest offering relying heavily on the solo work of guitarist Andy Basiola. The first few tracks, 'In Again', 'Stand My Ground' and 'Sea Of Chance' are alive with punchy and rhythmic guitar work, but across the three it's all very similar, only really coming into its own at the end of '...Chance'.

'Messages' speaks of bands with 1980's and 1990's Rock roots; it's great to hear a band who don't feel they have to play all the time and are confident enough to include full pauses in songs. Gus Macricostas' thumping bass line adds further infectious rhythm and Basiola works in a great solo. While the others are taking off, Luka "Twitch" Ravase's vocals, while delivered confidently, lack the energy or emotion to really ignite the songs. Don't speak too soon though! Ravase quickly switches it up on 'You Raised The Hell Outta Me', hissing out vocals alongside Arnaldo Rogano's driving drum beat.

'Beauty Is (As Beauty Does)' takes things up a notch, though sadly without a thumping bass to accompany it. The album is generally very polished and clean-cut in production and sound; it works well to bring out the grooves underscoring all the writing. It's not exactly Bluesy but I'd go almost as far as saying it's experimental; the songs seem longer than the time stated would suggest, exploring solos and styles throughout each song.

'Not Defeated' is my favourite track, switching around the tempos and vocal styles, keeping the whole thing fresh and creative yet still catchy. The sound isn't overwhelming either in terms of texture; clearly the band's experience has given them the confidence and knowledge to play more sparingly in all the right places. Ravase really shines through on the closing track 'Going Through' – clearly more comfortable in the lower register, he gets some edge to his voice which adds an authoritative touch.

LEAH – 'KINGS & QUEENS' *(Inner Wound)* SYMPHONIC METAL

Leah (McHenry) is a vocalist from Vancouver, Canada, who I first came across back in 2013 through a mutual Female-Fronted enthusiast. Her style could be described a Symphonic Metal but there is often Celtic and World Music influences that has prompted some to refer to her as "The Metal Enya". I reviewed Leah's debut 'Of Earth And Angels' back in 2013 and it was a huge hit with me. This was followed by an EP entitled 'Otherworld' (with a 3 track Christmas EP in between) and now she returns with her second full album 'Kings & Queens'.

Like several artists of late, this is another album that was funded via the pledge (Indiegogo) route. For the purposes of reference and transparency, its worth me mentioning that based on me already being a big fan, along with my expectation of the album's potential, I actually contributed to the campaign. Having now listened to it, I can say honestly not only was that potential realised... it was knocked out of the park.

Something that really raised my enthusiasm and seriously increased my interest was the special guests enlisted to help. The bass and drums/percussion were handled by Barend Courbois (Blind Guardian) and Sander Zoer (ex-Delain) respectively but there was another name that really excited me. The guitars, arrangements and production were handled by Timo Somers, who also happens to be the axe-man in my personal favourites Delain. So... a favourite singer combined with two members of Delain... you bet I was eager and with good cause!

With their help, Leah has created a Symphonic album of massive proportions that is every bit as good as anything from any of the big names you care to mention. 'Kings...' is made up of fifteen tracks that last an impressive seventy-eight minutes. There isn't a bad track on the album and even now after several plays it is tough for me to pick out any favourites or decide which ones to highlight; they are all fantastic. It is certainly her heaviest album yet but it still retains the Celtic and varied influences (Middle Eastern for example) that has differenciated Leah from others of her ilk. In terms of sound, imagine Delain mixed with a splash of Nightwish and a little Leaves Eyes and Serenity sprinkled in, then top it all off with Enya or Moya Brennan (Clannad) on vocals.

It will come as no surprise that I think 'Kings...' is absolutely magnificent. It's rich, beautiful, powerful, bombastic and majestic in equal measure and establishes Leah as a true Symphonic force. As was the case with my earlier Battle Beast review, 'Kings & Queens' is the second candidate that's probably going to end up in my "2015 Top 5" and another strong contender to maybe even top it...simply stunning!

Dave Scott

Future Shock have brought out a debut album that mirrors their shared musicianship; it's groovy, heavy and though in places could do with a bit more spark and variety, that doesn't take away too much from the album's strengths.

Sophie Brownlee

GAMMA RAY – 'THE BEST (OF)' *(earMusic)* POWER METAL

One of a triumvirate of unambiguously pivotal bands who between them pretty much wrote the book on Teutonic Power Metal – the others of course being Helloween and Blind Guardian – Gamma Ray have been at the very pinnacle of the European Metal market for more than a quarter of a century now.

Formed by guitarist Kai Hansen soon after his shock exit from the Helloween camp – you have to remember that at the time the two 'Keeper Of The Seven Keys' albums were rapidly becoming a global phenomenon – since debuting with 'Heading For Tomorrow' in February 1990, they've rarely disappointed. Various members have come and gone over the years as you'd expect (vocalist Ralf Scheepers being one of the more notable), but with Hansen (the one constant) at the helm, longstanding members Dirk Schlächter and Henjo Richter have helped steer a course that has literally blazed a trail for all comers to follow if they dare.

On something of a high following the rapturous reception afforded last year's sizzling 'Empire Of The Undead', Hansen has handpicked twenty-five of what he considers to be their most influential songs and pulled them together into one rather mouth-watering package. All the tracks have been re-mastered by Eike Freese (Deep Purple) and are presented here with exclusive liner notes from the man himself. Covering all eras of the band from the aforementioned debut '...Tomorrow' right up to '...Undead', for both the uninitiated and the long standing fan, this offers the quintessential GR experience. Fast songs, slow songs, moody songs, songs tinged with melancholy and melodrama… for anyone who thought Gamma Ray were just a one trick pony, think again!

A short bombastic intro announces the arrival of the kerosene-fuelled 'Armageddon' (from 'Powerplant'); it's overblown crescendos and deftly assured time changes the proud standard bearer for the legacy bequeathed them by Helloween. Next up is 'Heaven Can Wait' from the debut; a much less frantic track with a strong hook and a more traditional Metal approach along with some nice guitar touches from Kai. Then there's 'Dream Healer' which explores an altogether darker, more ominous side of the band, whilst 'Induction/Dethrone Tyranny' (from my personal favourite 'No World Order') shows Kai and company at their most enthrallingly cerebral… and that's just disc one!

Elsewhere, classics such as 'Valley Of The Kings', 'Rebellion', 'Tribute To The Past' and 'Blood Religion' all highlight the song-writing strength and depth the band have at their disposal. No previously unreleased little nuggets (unfortunately) but the new re-master certainly spruces up the sound, especially on the early tracks.

This album represents twenty-five of the best from a true Metal titan!

Dave Cockett

GUN – 'FRANTIC' *(Caroline)* ROCK

'Frantic' is the new album from Glasgow's finest, Gun. This is very much a retro album drawing on the influences of band favourites like New York Dolls, David Bowie and The Beatles, but also injecting a newer approach with some more Pop-based tracks.

Brothers Giuliano and Dante Gizzi, Paul McManus and Johnny McGlynn have brought out a great piece of work and, whilst Dante Gizzi plays bass on the actual album, recent recruit Andy Carr from young Melodic Rockers The Toi will be covering the bass duties during live dates.

'Labour Of Life' (noted as the first single) is a cross between Iggy Pop and the NYD, gritty with awesome guitar work. 'One Wrong Turn' has a bass line which drives this catchy Country Rock song. On the title track 'Frantic' Dante Gizzi could almost be mistaken for Neil Tennant at times or even Axl Rose from the 'November Rain' era. 'Hold Your Head Up' is a Beatles-ey, upbeat anthem with a nod given to Talking Heads 'Road To Nowhere' thrown in.

My two favourite tracks so far are right at the end of the record; 'Seraphina', the biggest Rocker on the album starts off like Van Halen but is almost Cult-esque, and then 'I Never Knew What I Had' which is a lyrical masterpiece and, with its definite sing-along potential, I kind of wish it was nearer the start rather than being the last track. That said, I guess that finishes the album on a high.

I seem to have drawn a lot of comparisons to other artists in this review, but for all the influences I've mentioned, this is most definitely a Gun album with all the attitude and 'Swagger' of their previous releases.

I must admit, it took me a few listens to get into this album fully, but it's definitely a grower and, like most enduring albums, it's the tracks you thought you liked least which are stuck in your head and you can't stop singing them – the title track being one in particular. Having attended the album launch in front of a small and select audience, 'Frantic' has been well received and is sure to be a hit for the band when it's released in March.

Sue Ashcroft

HEDERSLEBEN (II) – 'DIE NEUEN WELTEN' *(Independent)* PROGRESSIVE

Strange that this translates as 'The New Worlds' when the music here is defiantly old world. This German band, containing U.K. Subs originator Nicky Garrett and heavily involved with Nik Turner's post-Hawkwind output, really know how to bring the essence, gentle air and nonsense of certain 1960's Psychedelic Rock to the jaundiced ear.

This will all be heard through the prism of irony and cynicism of course, so that may make us place this in a compartment rather than just enjoying the abundance of sound; it may also make us look at where the music has been rather than where it can go. And of course we know it didn't go to plan; heroin replaced acid, things got darker, the music got bigger and more monolithic.

But this represents a time when anything seems possible and music matched the mood. Here we have gossamer incantations and an inching guitar and organ line, reaching out to the busy guitar ('On The Ground) Safe And Sound', 'Nomad World (Dreamstate)' and 'X05B' which have doleful chimes along with whispering and a familiar sense of play, not interested in going anywhere, just content to "grow and be maaan..."

'Zu Den Neuen Welten' ('About The New Worlds') is long moments of frankly tedious throbbing and 'Tiny Flowers/Little Moon' is quite charming, bothering to take the time to build interest rather than throw all the elements together and murmur "it's 1968, come on, get with it, square..."; it is lazy, but finds a groove which allows piano and organ, fitted onto a loose but meaty acoustic feel, to tickle our fancies somewhat.

You know, this could be seen as a gentler version of the 1960's sales grab that a lot of bands are into at the moment. That may be a shame, as the beautifully constructed ululations show their love of sonics shaped like sunshine.

Steve Swift

HEKZ – 'CAERUS' *(BMH Audio)* PROGRESSIVE

With almost a decade under their belts already, Bedford's HeKz have thus far released two EP's and a 2012 debut album of Progressively-tinged Metal which hinted at other twin guitar bands like Iron Maiden, Threshold and Queensryche. The quartet have now added keyboard player James Messenger to re-emerge at the tail end of 2014 with a new sound that switches the emphasis towards the Progressiveness without sacrificing their Metal roots.

On pieces like the epic opener 'Progress And Failure' and 'Disconnect The World' it's immediately apparent that staccato guitar riffs and tricky time signatures are the order of the day, along with Messenger's wide range of sounds and bassist Matt Young's refreshingly deep and rich voice; the darkness of the melodies is offset by some upbeat choruses and drummer Kirk Brandham's quirky rhythms. Similarly 'Kingdom' and 'From Obscurity To Eternity' have soaring melodic passages amongst the angst-ridden and melancholy sections, but it's all done in a clever and natural way that doesn't sound contrived. Obviously Dream Theater and even Rush have come to the forefront of their influences, but I would also add Fates Warning, the much-missed Dead Soul Tribe and the work of Magellan's Trent Gardner to what I'm hearing, whether it's intentional, subliminal or purely coincidental.

There are three lengthy epics that best show-off their new direction, with the melodies taking centre stage over the instrumentation on 'The Black Hand' and the many straight-forward and accessible parts, along with superb guitar solos from Tom Smith and Alastair Beveridge, on 'Homo Ex Machina'. The highlight of this album is the sixteen minute closer 'Journey's End?', which reprises all the best melodies and themes from the previous tracks and seamlessly pieces them together with some new parts to create a stirring and emotional tour-de-force. The addition of cello, violin and flute just adds to the epic feel.

Self-produced and mixed and mastered by the multi-talented John Mitchell, the powerful 'Caerus' should bring HeKz a much wider fan base and with more extensive live shows a successful future should ensue.

Phil Ashcroft

HERMAN RAREBELL & FRIENDS – 'HERMAN'S SCORPIONS SONGS' *(Solid Rockhouse)* HARD ROCK

'Herman's Scorpions Songs' features thirteen classics and one new Thomas Wellnowski (aka Thomas Perry) composed song entitled 'Let It Shine'. These thirteen tracks would grace any Scorpions' compilation album and highlight what amazing songs the German band have produced over the years. I have to admit to listening in absolute horror the first time I played the album the whole way through as I was so used to hearing the heavily accented Klaus Meine handling the vocals, however, after several further listens I came to appreciate not only Klaus' underrated vocal abilities but also some great interpretations of these classic songs. Most of Scorpions' music was written by Rudolph Schenker, however, the lyrics were largely written by their drummer Herman Rarebell.

The unenviable task of kicking off the album goes to Bobby Kimball (Toto) on 'Rock You Like A Hurricane' and after the aforementioned few listens, Kimball makes a good fist of it. Listening to 'Passion Rules The Game' makes you yearn for John Parr to record a whole album of Hard Rock classics.

Michael Voss handles all guitars and bass duties on the album as well as recording, mixing and mastering; he also sings on 'Loving You Sunday Morning'. The production is awesome throughout and brings new life to the songs that arguably have sonically never sounded so good. Santana vocalist Alex Ligertwood takes on 'Is There Anybody There', which also features an excellent solo from Voss.

Three vocalists that have struggled in recent years, in my humble opinion, sound absolutely fantastic on this album; Don Dokken ('You Give Me All I Need'), Jack Russell ('Don't Make No Promises') and Gary Barden ('Falling In Love'). They all should be clamouring for Voss to produce their next albums!

Unsurprisingly, Doogie White makes a good job of 'Make It Real' but I doubt if anyone could better the original. Johnny Gioeli of Hardline handles 'Dynamite' that's not just a straight-forward copy of the original, whilst 'Arizona' features Perry on vocals. 'Love Is Blind' that originally featured on the Scorpions' compilation 'Best' has the Blues-rasp of Paul Shortino, whilst 'Another Piece Of Meat' is interpreted superbly by Tony Martin.

The one song that does match up to the original version, and my personal album favourite, is the fantastic version of 'Animal Magnetism' featuring the Baritone Opera singer Michael Nagy and some amazing flamenco-style guitar playing from Voss.

The aforementioned new song '...Shine' concludes the album and features Unbreakable's Al Crespo on lead vocals and ironically has me thinking what it would sound like covered by Meine.

Although not an immediate hit, after repeated listens this is an album that is essential for all Scorpions' fans.

Mark Donnelly

LONELY ROBOT – 'PLEASE COME HOME' *(InsideOut)* PROGRESSIVE

This is the first solo album from It Bites/Frost*/Athena's John Mitchell under the moniker Lonely Robot. The band features stellar performances from keyboard genius and Frost* founder Jem Godfrey, oft-kilted bassist Nick Beggs and drumming legend Craig Blundell – a curious bunch of Prog's finest that have gathered together with Mitchell at his own Outhouse Studios with no constraints other than Mitchell's imagination.

If you're already a fan of the vocalist, guitarist, producer and song-writer, you won't be disappointed as he has poured his heart and soul into this work, even taking to the streets of London dressed in a space suit in order to fully experience the feeling of solitude... and to get some cool pictures for his album sleeve into the bargain.

The most upbeat song on 'Please Come Home' is 'The Boy In The Radio' featuring the instantly recognisable soulful rasp of Peter Cox of Go West on vocals. Other guests of note are Nik Kershaw – a supremely talented and underrated guitarist, Marillion's Steve Hogarth (although only on keys and backing vocals) and Touchstone's diminutive Kim Seviour. Mitchell's long time compadre Blundell is a true powerhouse and his technical playing is outstanding throughout.

There are several narrative passages – sounding as if mission control is trying to contact the Lonely Robot without success. This comes from British actor Lee Ingleby – a personal friend of Mitchell's and a perfect choice for the part.

This is a very emotional album, "lonely" almost sums it up – solitary, something to listen to on your own in the dark with headphones on. I don't think I've been moved so much by an album for a very long time, not probably since Todd Rundgren's 'Healing'.

The bonus track 'Why Do We Stay' is a heartfelt and, dare I say, highly personal look at relationships, questioning the mental self-doubt we all feel from time to time. This duet with Mostly Autumn's Heather Findlay is a tear-jerker for sure; it's simply beautiful.

This album is, without doubt, one of the finest pieces of Pop Prog I have ever heard. It's a masterpiece of beautiful tone, very deep lyrics and haunting melodies. It is not a concept piece as such, but the 'Please Come Home' theme reprises throughout the album.

I can safely say that, even in January, this is definitely going to be in my top ten of 2015.

Sue Ashcroft

HION MARTELL – 'RIFFS IN A BOX' *(Viskningar och Vrål)* ROCK

This is an intriguingly titled album from a Swedish band looking to break out of their home country with their first new material since 2011. Described as 'Bluesy meat and potatos Rock And Roll', it's also the first album on which they've recorded all the material in the same studio with the same producer.

It's certainly a good-spirited, cohesive, friendly and well-intentioned album featuring, as it does, a set of well played songs with a happy feel and significant "pick me up" potential. You'll tap along to 'No More Hard Times', 'Devil In A Dress' and 'Fools', while the guitar antics of the ever-so-cool Ulf Hagberg might well send you scuttling off to the wardrobe in search of your old air guitar.

'Riffs In A Box' is an accessible album that plays to a general (and possibly ageing) Rock audience. It has a very mainstream feel and Rocks gently at the more Poppy end of the spectrum. Ultimately, it probably veers a bit too close to the middle of the road for my personal taste; it's more Travelling Wilburys than Bob Dylan, if you know what I mean. It lacks a bit of an edge and, at times (perhaps), a bit of aggression. 'Forest Trails And City Streets' is a case in point; despite the mournful "Hovis" style intro, it quickly becomes the kind of minor Rock Opera flavoured track that Meat Loaf might have knocked out way back when. Similarly, 'Forever Blue', while pleasant enough, is like early Bruce Springsteen without the angst, or Bon Jovi without the big sound and the pumped up pomp.

There are fewer standout riffs on display than the title might lead you to expect, but if you like easy listening, predominantly 1970's-influenced Rock, don't let that put you off. While a touch more darkness wouldn't go amiss, 'Riffs In A Box' is what it is – and I've got to confess that the Southern Boogie feel of the upbeat 'Working On It' and the infectious fun of 'Fly Tox Jive' have, with repeated plays, continued to raise a smile. The version I have includes a couple of bonus tracks, the cool-chick backing vocal enhanced 'High On Martell' and the 2011 download single 'Water', both of which add interest and quality to the set. Nice stuff, if a little on the light side.

Michael Anthony

HONEY RYDER – 'BORN IN A BOTTLE' *(Oceanic)* ROCK

Honey Ryder are essentially a Female-Fronted, three-piece U.K. band comprising of Lindsay O'Mahony (vocals), Jason Huxley (guitar) and Matt Bishop (guitar). Jon O'Mahony plays drums in the studio but session drummers and bass players are generally utilised whenever there is a tour. 'Born In A Bottle' is the third HR studio release, maintaining a high quality trend that started with 'Rising Up' in 2009 and 'Marley's Chains' in 2012.

The title track is a Blues-based Rock workout conjuring up images of the Cajun Deep South. Written by Huxley and featuring a good use of the harmonica, it is certainly a departure for the band compared to previous material but a perfect up-tempo way to get things started. 'What If We've Only Got Tonight' is my favourite album track. It is uplifting, hinting at Fleetwood Mac, flowing smoothly from verse to chorus with an AOR-feel due to the nature of the melodies and hook. A nice slide solo and Lindsay O'Mahony's voice are just the icing on the cake.

'Drink With Me' is another up-tempo song, Folksy and feel good with an instant hook whilst the laid back 'Mirage' glides along on a lilting guitar riff, again finding Lindsay O'Mahony in great voice. The punchy 'In A Heartbeat' is a pacey number with an insistent beat alongside an edgy chorus and 'Damn It I'm In Love Again' covers a number of relationship issues that will resonate with many. The dreamy 'Years From Now' is the closest thing to a ballad and the soothing subtleties contrast nicely with the energy of the other songs.

Jon O'Mahony's vibrant production brings the material to life, giving the impression of a big budget recording project. The songs were created in Nashville and London, mixed in California by Brad Gilderman and mastered in New York by Tom Coyne so it is evident HR have enough of a profile to warrant big name involvement.

It is the opinion of many in the press that Honey Ryder's style leans heavily towards Country music and that would certainly seem correct based on the first two albums, seeing them unfairly regarded as the British version of Lady Antebellum. Opinions may differ once '...Bottle' sees the light of day in 2015 as the style throughout leans heavily towards the Pop end of the commercial music spectrum and any one of the album's eleven tracks would fit comfortably on a mainstream radio playlist.

If you liked 'Rising...' and '...Chains' then 'Born In A Bottle' is a must and it will be great to see the band back on the road again with new songs to showcase.

Dave Bott

INLEGEND – 'STONES AT GOLIATH' *(Eat The Beat)* ROCK

Any readers up for hand-hammered piano craft, or Symphonic, piano heavy Metal – no lead guitar whatsoever? If that's grabbed your attention then please read on.

InLegend are the brainchild of Bastian Emig who grew up in Burkina Faso. The country's celebrated music had a huge impact on Emig and led to him developing a unique drumming style which later transferred to his self-taught piano playing. He moved to Germany and played drums for Van Canto, however feeling constrained, Emig decided to spread his wings and formed InLegend.

Their debut album 'Ballads 'N' Bullets' was released in 2011 and the album met with critical success so Emig decided to take the music out on the road with the help of two pianists/keyboardists, a bassist and drummer as well as himself on lead vocals. With a lengthy time on tour, the group was able to hone their sound and almost two years elapsed before 'Stones At Goliath' was recorded. The album contains a string section, gospel and children's choir alongside Emig who now has a settled band with him as well; Daniel Schmidle and Daniel Galmarini on piano and keytar (oh indeed!), Paul Perlejewski on bass with Marcos Feminella on drums.

The new album is awash with pianos, keyboards and synths and in places it is hard to believe that heavy tracks such as 'Threatened' (which has a really catchy chorus) and 'Envoys Of Peace' do not contain any guitar. 'Another Me', in places, sounds like 'That's All' by Genesis. 'Empire Of Concrete' has a Coldplay sounding intro but don't let that put you off as it builds into a toe-tapping, Rocking number. 'The Voodoo Girl' is a slow, haunting and dark tune but very mesmerizing none the less while 'Alienation' comes across like modern day Asia. Penultimate song 'On The Morrow' is one of my favourites on the album and again I find it difficult to believe that there is no guitar on the track.

The only criticism I have (apart from no guitars….just kidding) is that Emig's vocals get lost in the mix on the heavier tracks, whereas on the slower numbers his pipes sound fine. So I've surprised myself by how much this album has grown on me and I believe that many of you will not be disappointed if you give the album a chance.

Az Chaudhry

JJ GREY & MOFRO – 'OL' GLORY' *(Provogue/Mascot)* SOUTHERN/COUNTRY/ FOLK

If truth be known, this fabulous Southern band have been slowly moving towards the thick, Motown and Stax-influenced Funk sound with a bit of Country Rock sass behind it, so loved by bands like St Paul And The Broken Bones and also very successful at the moment; the gentle, spidery personal softness of 'Orange Blossoms' and 'Georgia Warhorse' now a seemingly distant memory.

They have always had that ability to shake their tail feathers, that winsome wink so apparent in the opener of their last great album, the stunning 'Your Lady, She's Shady'. There is nothing to match that here, but those songs come along once every few years; this has beautiful playing, with plaintive heart rending and foot-tapping swagger aplenty.

See 'Turn Loose'; such a tight strut, chicken scratching guitar, bass sax parping away, falsetto and bass following it, just such fun. The title track is even better, electric piano announcing the intention, joined by a saucy tambourine and that Joanna solo; this has even got a James Brown call-response jam-feel, which you know is coming back to you – the groove is everything here, but what a groove!

Sometimes, the broad brass and mid-tempo nature can give you a sense of déjà vu, but they are as well produced as you would want and as assured as they can be, it just sometimes sounds stentorian and feels too grown up, we need playfulness too. Of course when they take a step back and open themselves, they are beautiful, pristine and pure as ice; 'The Island' gives you this.

JJ Grey & Mofro are developing. 'Every Minute' shows you where they've been and where they're going. That expansion is glorious… their music is stunning. They are on their own journey and don't need your help with that. They just need you to spend some time with them. You'll be so glad you did.

Steve Swift

KARI RUESLATTEN – 'THE COLLECTION' *(GMR/Border)* SOUTHERN/COUNTRY/FOLK

Kari Rueslatten came to prominence as lead singer of Norwegian Doom Metal merchants The 3rd And The Mortal who pioneered the use of big, heavy, doom-laden riffs with haunting atmospheric melodies, topped off by the beautiful, ethereal, soprano vocals of Rueslatten and went on to inspire the likes of The Gathering, Paatos and Nightwish amongst others.

Rueslatten left the band after a single album to pursue a career as a solo artist which is now incredibly into its twentieth year and 'The Collection' compiles the best of her work across her two decade career including a newly recorded version of 'Why So Lonely' (originally recorded by T3ATM and featuring Tuomas Holopainen from Nightwish) together with two live recordings from her 'Time To Tell' tour.

Those expecting the crunching riffs of her former days will need to look elsewhere, however if you are after something altogether more dreamy, melancholic and quite simply beautiful then this will suit you down to the ground.

Musically Rueslatten treads a Folk-influenced path, not the finger in the ear sandal wearing type, but the more haunting atmospheric style typified by Clannad and the Mary Fahl-fronted October Project and vocally she sits between the sweet, smooth style of Heather Nova with an exquisite twist of Petronella Nettermalm from the wonderful Paatos.

When she sings in her native Norwegian, the songs take an even more magical turn. 'Hor Min Sang' with its spine-tingling melody is breath-taking and made all the more beautiful by the poetic lilt of her delivery and 'Trollferd', one of the two live tracks, may be even better.

'…Lonely' would be a good place for the uninitiated to dip their toe in to discover more and the Holopainen piano melody and string accompaniment backing Rueslatten's siren-like voice is hard to resist. In fact this would be something that would set the switchboards buzzing if played on Radio 2.

Although 'Fishing' is best avoided for being just a little too quirky, 'The Collection' is a hugely enjoyable over-view of a twenty year career that will almost certainly encourage the curious to explore more deeply.

Mick Burgess

KUKO DE KOBRA – 'A GIRL AND HER GIRAFFE' *(Target)* ROCK

I think we already have a winner for the "Weirdest Album Title Of The Year" with 'A Girl And Her Giraffe'; it is the sophomore album from Danish four-piece Kuko De Kobra who took their name from the circus artist 'Fakir Kuko The Cobra' (real name John).

Martin Pagaard, who co-produced the band's debut album 'Naja Naja', takes on the full production duties as well as the drums on '…Giraffe'. John Sharling, who handles the bass and lead vocals, is the principal song-writer and describes this album as "a Rock record with a strong Pop sensibility".

The latter is sustained by having the majority of the songs only three minutes or so in length with the exception of the seven minute 'Be Leaf' which is noted for some spectacular solos courtesy of Martin Jepsen Andersen (Blindstone, Meridian) and Thomas Skov Christensen.

The first couple of songs are very catchy and immediately grab the listeners attention, starting with 'Ocean Wide' that was originally released last August, as an alternative and artistic music video shot entirely on an iPhone. Secondly, 'Fitzroy Road (Head In The Oven)' was released online on the 50th anniversary of the death of American poet and novelist Sylvia Plath.

Several of the songs remind me of a cross between two albums that I have previously reviewed for Fireworks, Brandon Boyd's 'Sons Of The Sea' and 'Voyage' by The Vintage Caravan, though they never quite scale the heights reached by those albums. The comparison is not surprising as Sharling's voice is a cross between Boyd and Óskar Logi Ágústsson.

The hard, Blues Rock of 'Silence The Killer', 'Undecider' and 'PRBN (It's Only Love – Give It Away)' are in the vein of the aforementioned TVC whilst the sixty-two second 'Shake It' would sit nicely on a Ramones album.

There are a half a dozen ballads on the album, most of which are very enjoyable; the guitar-orientated 'Pieces Missing', 'A Wrong Decision (Dizzy Miss Thin Lizzy)', 'Jenny' and the Bluesy 'Lone Bird On A Long Wire', being the pick of them. I found 'Remember' to be a little drab and the album finishes on a bit of a downer with the title track; a slow ballad, that is a little melancholy and is only followed by thirty-three seconds of morse-code titled 'Jesse Owens And The Secret Message'.

Those that like their Rock a little Avant-Garde will find 'A Girl And Her Giraffe' magnifique.

Mark Donnelly

MAINSTREET – 'SECOND CHANCE' *(Independent)* MELODIC ROCK

From the opening flurry, one can certainly hear the passion that these six Italian Rockers have! 'Second Chance' is MainStreet's second effort but it has taken five years to make and, yes, we can hear why! Flawlessly executed, MS's blend of Melodic Progressive Rock travels is likened to a sleek and elegant luxurious sports car; subtle curves, plush leather interior and an engine that roars like a lion.

This album is full of up-tempo songs, such as the opening pair of 'Short Steps' and 'No Way'. As far as ballads are concerned there's 'Empty Eyes' which is an exceptional showcase of Andrea Delsignore's rich vocals that are sensitive and textured.

The music also meets that richness level and every piece on this album showcases all of the members' talents. MS is made up of two guitarists, a keyboardist and the traditional drums and bass duo which combines to create a powerful, deeply layered assortment of music that, at times, blisters along and then all of a sudden takes a sharp turn and you have all the sensitivity that a heartfelt love song can muster.

Over the last five years, the group have added new members and re-focused their efforts to contain more orchestral movements within each musical creation. MS are a hard working, independent group that pilots everything themselves from the writing sessions to album artwork to the recording and producing; all six have had their creative input upon '…Chance'.

As with all masterpieces, this effort took time to ripen and end the result is a robust, swirling, powerful collection of Melodic Rock. Each and every song will fill your music room with powerful arrangements and fill your heart with memorable moments that will leave you wanting more. The album features stunning performances from guitarists Ivan Garbuio and Mauro Guarnieri and equally matched is the keyboard wizardry of Pietro Venezia whilst keeping it all together and grounded is drummer Ivan Belloni and bassist Antonello Colamonaco. Venezia also arranged all the orchestral movements, and all six had a hand in the overall sound of each piece. It is now rare to see this much effort from within a band and a sign that not only shows that passion, but the love and care each one has for their craft and art!

'Second Chance' is a very refined, passionate musical statement by these six seasoned musicians from Italy… the nation of passion!

Bruce E.J. Atkinson

LEGION – 'ANIMAL INSIDE' *(ZRecords)* HARD ROCK

Talk about prolific. 'Animal Inside' is Legion's seventh album in less than five years; any way you look at it, that's not bad going. Vocalist Phil Vincent and guitarist Vince O'Regan clearly tickle each other's song-writing fancies and the result is a seemingly endless stream of Melodic Metal that, temporarily at least, sates their creative urges and keeps their fans happy.

"We want to create great sounding, fist-pumping, ass-kicking, timeless music, just like our heroes," Vincent told Fireworks back in Issue 64. Well, with 'Animal…' they certainly have a great sounding album of solid, competent, "timeless" Rock, where British Steel meets American AOR. The general production is classy – icy and atmospheric, evoking memories of Hair Metal Whitesnake or early Queensrÿche perhaps. Vincent's vocals add warmth and gloss over the intentionally jagged Metallic edges. The sound is big, familiar and welcoming. So what of the songs? Most start in promising, uplifting fashion, courtesy of O'Regan's impressive riffs. Some tracks deliver on the early promise, and some don't.

Opener 'Fantasy', with its 'Bark At The Moon' style riff, 'Standing Alone' and 'Black Cloud' are tracks that probably do the guitar work justice, while closer 'Don't Mean Nothing' and 'Turn Back Time' have me sitting on the fence. The latter offers a storming opening to what, traditionally, would have been the "second side" – and the familiar, old-school feel of this

album is certainly a strength.

Pick of tracks for me is 'Roll The Dice' which announces itself with a riff straight out of the Billy Duffy song-book and the album's most catchy chorus. Also worthy of mention is the ballad-like 'Come Back To Me', which features a smooth vocal performance, nice choral effects and one of the album's stand out solos.

There is nothing to dislike here. But I do find myself wondering how much of the material really lifts Legion and 'Animal Inside' above the heel-snapping pack and the also-rans. I'm not entirely convinced that there's quite enough fist-pumping and ass-kicking going on, although there is enough of it on offer for me to encourage you to grab a copy and make your own mind up.

After all, I had my doubts about the Hair Metal version of Whitesnake too.

Michael Anthony

LUNA ROSSA – 'SECRETS & LIES' *(Firefly)* ROCK

I've the utmost admiration for musical talent and that's something both Anne-Marie Helder and Jonathan Edwards possess in abundance. Not content with Panic Room, which sits firmly in the Progressive genre, they started Luna Rossa as a side endeavour to concentrate on music driven by acoustic instrumentation. Helder also has a solo career and performs with other artists including Mostly Autumn which all goes to accentuate the aforementioned talent.

Arriving swiftly after their debut album ('Sleeping Pills & Lullabies'), 'Secrets & Lies' is another exquisite collection of beautifully created songs which are played superbly and arranged with melodies that are to die for. In fact I'd venture that this surpasses the debut. Helder has a superb voice which enables her to deliver vocals with incredible passion, feeling and pathos on every song.

The use of Celtic harp (Sarah Dean), strings (Luna Rossa Quartet) and double bass (Andy Coughlan) all add immensely to the delicate beauty of the music, providing both a sophisticated edge and a wonderful warmth and depth to the arrangements.

'Aurora' opens the album delightfully as it builds in inspirational fashion; the unspoken vocal melody is quite gorgeous. It's an uplifting theme like the dawning of a new day, hence the title I guess. The title track is another triumph albeit bittersweet in that the lyrical content is bleak. It's storytelling at its very best and incredibly poignant, the beauty of the melody belying the lyrics. The grand piano is replaced by the distinctive tones of the Fender Rhodes electric piano on 'Disappointment' for what is a slow Blues number while 'The Black Dog' is led by acoustic guitar giving a jolly feel to yet another dark lyrical theme.

'Flowers in My Hair' features Edwards' piano and the strings with more wonderfully singing from Helder; the melody from 'Frere Jacques' is brilliantly interposed into the song. The mood changes with 'Happy Little Song' and bizarrely, for me, it's the least impressive track on the album with it coming across as rather throwaway and twee.

A cover of Todd Rundgren's 'Tiny Demons' is up next, it's outstanding with the theme being played by electric piano and a subtle double bass along with grand piano that appears later in spine-tingling fashion; it's a wonderful song, beautifully played. Harp then leads the way on 'Fly Away'. 'I've Been Wrong Before' is a Randy Newman song previously covered by Dusty Springfield and Cilla Black, neither of whom delivered it as well as Helder does here. 'The Harmony' and 'No Chords Left' are both terrific, but I'd have switched them round so the album closes on the more upbeat of the two; that aside this is a wonderful album by any standards.

Gary Marshall

MABEL GREER'S TOYSHOP – 'NEW WAY OF LIFE' *(Independent)* PROGRESSIVE

I'd expect every one of the Fireworks readership to be aware of Prog giants Yes, but few to know that they originated as Mabel Greer's Toyshop. Formed in London during 1966, the original band's music was a combination of Psychedelic, Blues and Classically-influenced arrangements. Chris Squire joined a year later and gradually the formative members of Yes replaced MGT's founders and the name eventually changed.

Forty-five years later, two of the founding members, Clive Bayley (composer, guitarist & vocalist) and Bob Hagger (drums), met and, according to their biography, decided to go to the studio and try out their old sound. This resulted in the band's revival with Tony Kaye (keyboards) returning along with new recruits Billy Sherwood (multi-instrumentalist) and bassist Hugo Barré.

I'm not familiar with their early output but it's fair to say they have almost certainly captured the ethos of their "old sound" as this album is decidedly retro both sonically and stylistically. Those familiar with my reviews will know that I'm not averse to retro, far from it, but this album stretches even my tolerance levels. Consequently I think this album's appeal is likely to be extremely limited and confined to the most ardent of Prog fans.

There's certainly a 1960/1970's vibe going on with The Moody Blues coming to mind from time-to-time as does the Canterbury sound of the likes of Soft Machine, Caravan and Camel, however where they differ from those bands is in both the quality of the musical themes/melodies and lyrical content; the former lack any conviction while the latter is lame. In fact, these are some of the weakest lyrics I've heard in quite a while and their delivery is decidedly passionless.

After several plays none of the eleven songs on offer have made any sort of lasting impression on me; I usually know when an album's good when I find myself singing bits throughout the day when I'm at work. That's not happened here. If ever there was a case of "try before you buy" this has to be it.

Gary Marshall

MARTIN TURNER & FRIENDS – 'THE GARDEN PARTY' *(Dirty Dog)* PROGRESSIVE

To put this live album from Martin Turner into context, let's start be giving it its full title... 'Martin Turner And Friends Featuring Ted Turner And Laurie Wisefield – The Garden Party, A Celebration Of Wishbone Ash Music (The Private Recording)'. Now that's a fair mouthful, but in terms of conveying exactly what this surprisingly low key release is, it doesn't get much clearer.

Those who follow the fortunes of The Ash will already know that founder member Martin Turner has, while he can still refer to it, been forbidden from directly using the name of the band he helped form. Yet there's little doubt, what with Ted Turner and Wisefield guesting at this live event held back in the summer of 2012, that there's as much validity to what he's doing as there is to his co-founder Andy Powell, who still performs as and technically "owns" Wishbone Ash. However, add in a rare appearance on stage (physical, not musical) from original drummer Steve Upton, which actually received the loudest crowd response of the whole event, and this double album taken from Martin Turner's "private recording" of the day is truly something special.

Avoiding the "usual" selections, Martin Turner and his band of drummer Dave Wagstaffe and guitarists Danny Willson and Ray Hatfield instead showcase some of the lesser celebrated numbers from the WA catalogue, 'Standing In The Rain' a hugely engaging opener whilst 'Fire Sign', which never appeared on a studio album, is atmospheric with trademark licks and an easy groove. Add in the more Progressive 'Way Of The World' and Martin Turner solo offering 'Broken Down House' and this really is an eclectic set that's fantastically performed. However, 'Valediction' begins the party proper; Ted Turner entering the stage to add his unmistakable guitar to this and the next five selections – including 'The King Will Come', 'In The Skin' and 'Why Don't We'. Wisefield then joins the throng, creating an on-stage first – his and Ted Turner's tenures' in the band didn't actually cross over – for a four-prong guitar attack at a beautifully breathless 'Living Proof' and classy 'Jailbait'.

'The Garden Party' may be billed simply as Martin Turner And Friends, however what friends they are. For fans of Wishbone Ash, it doesn't get much better than this.

Steven Reid

ORDEN OGAN – 'RAVENHEAD' *(AFM)* POWER METAL

I've been a big fan of this band's work ever since their debut 'Vale' came out back in 2008. With each new album I've noticed that they were always trying to outdo what had come before, working harder to make their music bigger, brasher and bolder. This new album, entitled 'Ravenhead', sees Orden Ogan taking their music to a whole new level.

The songs are all (and I do mean all) immediately unforgettable with each chorus and hook-line worked and honed to perfection. As a result you can't stop singing them even when the album has stopped playing. So what have main song-writer and the band's driving force Seeb Levermann (vocals/guitars) along with Tobin Kersting (guitars), Niels Löffler (bass) and Dirk Meyer-Berhorn (drums) come up with that is so special on 'Ravenhead'? Well, it's a combination of over the top Metal songs, musicianship of the highest order and devastating melodic sensibilities that could sink a battle ship.

Opening with the seemingly compulsory intro, the band soon blow away the cobwebs with the title track, its blistering guitars riffs and bulldozer-like bass and drums hit you square in the face as they force its wonderfully catchy melodies into your brain. The vocals by Levermann are superb but it's the multi-faceted vocal harmonies that are the true standout on this (and every other) track found on this album; they really have to be heard to be fully appreciated.

Next comes three songs that, taken back to back, are some of the most infectious Metal tracks I've heard in a while. 'F.E.V.E.R', 'The Lake' and 'Evil Lies In Every Man' are songs for which the term "overblown" is a real understatement. OO seem to have thrown everything they possibly could get their hands on (including the kitchen sink and side-board) into these songs; you'll find acres of melody, tons of guitars and masses of vocals that all make for one hell of a listening experience. They follow these wonderful tracks with even more over the top, brilliantly performed Melodic Metal in 'Here At The End Of The World', the stunning 'Deaf Among The Blind' and 'Sorrow Is Your Tale' to name three, all of which continue OO's assault on the ears but it's a pleasant assault if there can be such a thing; it simply leaves you wanting them to attack you further.

'Ravenhead' is simply Orden Ogan's best album so far. They have been continually building to this since their debut was released and finally all the boxes have been ticked and they have recorded an album that few others in the genre will be able to match. One word sums this album up... fantastic!

Ian Johnson

MELISSA ETHERIDGE – 'THIS IS M.E.' *(SPV)* ROCK

It's not often I get to comment on the work of a Grammy and Academy Award winner and star on the Hollywood Boulevard Walk of Fame, but, well, here we are with the new Melissa Etheridge album 'This Is M.E.'

As you'd expect, it's pretty easy on the ear. Etheridge's ballsy and sometimes gravelly voice contrasts nicely with the light and gentle Rock of most of the tunes on offer here.

'I Won't Be Alone Tonight' finds her "looking for an angel in cheap sunglasses and low rise jeans". The lyrical themes here, and elsewhere, will appeal to those of a certain vintage who have reason to reflect on their relationship history and life experiences. She won't be alone you know and why should she be?

Indeed, perhaps most attention will be focused on the heartfelt 'Who Are You Waiting For' – a track written for and debuted at her wedding to Linda Wallem that is being lauded as one of the most personal and emotional recordings of her career. Of its lyrics, Etheridge has said: "I sat down at the piano, started writing about how we were friends for years and years, and as we got closer it was 'who are you waiting for? I'm right here!'" It's touching stuff.

Elsewhere, 'Take My Number' is straightforward American radio-oriented Rock but does a job. 'A Little Hard Hearted' has the album's sweetest sounding melody whilst 'Monster' is a bit meaner. 'Ain't That Bad" is meaner still and is all the better for it. 'All The Way Home' and 'Stranger Road' are enjoyable but more overtly Poppy, whereas 'Like A Preacher' is a bit more edgy and has a bit more vocal attack. Those, at any rate, are the picks for me.

'This Is M.E.' benefits from the contributions of a high quality and experienced supporting cast that includes Jerrod Bettis (Adele, One Republic, Eric Hutchinson, Gavin DeGraw), Jon Levine (Nelly Furtado, K'Naan, Selena Gomez), Jerry Wonda (the Grammy Award-winning producer of The Fugees, Mary J. Blige, Akon), young hip-hop artist RoccStar (Usher, Chris Brown) and cellist Neyla Pekarek of the Folk band The Lumineers.

Etheridge is clearly excited about these collaborations, the album and the creative spell that produced it. Undoubtedly, there is much here that existing fans will enjoy. There's also a limited edition digi-pack with a couple of extra tracks for those who want even more.

Michael Anthony

MOTOR SISTER – 'RIDE' *(Metal Blade)* ROCK

Motor Sister could be classed a "super-group", depending on your taste, comprising of a team of musicians whose collective musical pedigrees speak for themselves. Mother Superior founder, guitarist, and vocalist Jim Wilson fronts the band, with Anthrax's Scott Ian on guitar, Pearl Aday on backing vocals, Joey Vera (Fates Warning) on bass and John Tempesta (White Zombie, The Cult) on drums.

The group was originally assembled to jam for Ian's fiftieth birthday party, given Ian was a huge fan of Mother Superior. Thanks to Ian's wife Aday, who has been working on her solo career with their front-man Wilson for years, all it took was a quick phone call and the stage was literally set for Ian's dream gig... only bettered by him taking part.

The music contained is a collection of Mother Superior songs, to these ears very reminiscent of Detroit's MC5. 'A-Hole' is peddle to the floor Rock that barely takes a breath, 'This Song Reminds Me Of You' has a more soulful approach and a guitar solo delivered in perfect style. There is a dirty attitude to 'Whore' which has Punk Rock energy and 'Get That Girl' follows suit musically.

I especially enjoyed the Country twang of the guitar in 'Head Hanging Low', the band strip away the crust and get to the real meat of great song-writing. 'Fork In The Road' has the guitarists trading licks in an insane fuzzy fury.

Anthrax fans may find this album a little left of centre, but give it some time and there are a great many stand alone moments.

Ray Paul

NIGHT DEMON – 'CURSE OF THE DAMNED' *(SteamhammerSPV)* HEAVY METAL

Night Demon presents a bit of a contradiction for me. On one hand this Californian-based trio's debut album is an exuberant, high voltage piece of Classic Metal that's full of Hard Rocking riffs and lung busting anthems that is certainly a throwback to energy of the early days of Iron Maiden, Diamond Head etc. But therein lays the issue. In 1980 'Curse Of The Damned' would have been up there with the best at the time but thirty years on it still sounds as if it's a NWOBHM debut.

To be fair, that's something that American Rock bands have rarely been able to achieve and Night Demon have certainly done it with some degree of style. 'Screams In The Night' kicks off in furious fashion with a style that is reminiscent of early Tank; pounding riffs and drums drive along with what is an impressive vocal performance throughout from Jarvis Leatherby who also handles bass duties. Whilst the title track itself drops the pace a little, it's still packed with the same power and muscle.

'Full Speed Ahead' is just that, frantic guitars with more than a hint of Maiden in there before The Howling Man' which is a piece of classic DH if ever there was one; a slower, pounding intro – in the vein of 'Am I Evil' – leading into the main riff sounding like a fired up take of 'Sucking My Love'. It's even got a couple of time changes and a lengthy guitar solo in its near seven minute length.

There's some strong performances here with a high energy and enthusiastic feel to it all. But as someone who experienced the original NWOBHM days it all seems a bit out of its time. Even the production sounds very much of that era so I worry that whilst 'Curse Of The Damned' certainly has its good points, there will be little longevity in its appeal. There's a sort of built in obsolescence that, despite the positive first impressions, after a couple of plays becomes a sort of contemporary nostalgia if there is such a thing.

But taken at face value this is a most enjoyable kick-ass Classic Metal romp. If, like me, you were disappointed that Brian Tatler has admitted he's not interested in recording any new material with DH, then this is a worthwhile alternative.

Ian Parry

PALLAS – 'WEAREWHOWEARE' *(Independent)* PROGRESSIVE

They're survivors, Pallas, from that brilliant 1980's U.K. Prog resurgence. Often thought of with Marillion, who are also surviving (rather well) and Twelfth Night (surviving as a cottage industry); they do have similarities. Like Pallas, TN changed singer (Andy Sears for Geoff Mann) and moved from a very Prog debut to a 1980's Chart/Prog hybrid, Pallas changed singer (Euan Lowson for Alan Reed) and moved from the Progtastic 'The Sentinel' to more commercial 'The Wedge'. All of these albums were stupendous.

Pallas found their voice again and really ramped up the sound on 'Beat The Drum' and 'Cross And The Crucible' as it became less of an issue to show songs in suites. There was always an endearing, hard working quality to their work (I remember them on '...Wedge' tour having to start again when they fluffed their entrance) but this album is different; here they seem really at it, like Prog elder statesman with huge songs to match.

As Marillion have done, this was funded by crowd-sourcing and comes in a download or with sumptuous forty page booklet; the tunes match the hoopla! 'Shadow Of The Sun' preparing us for a little electronica but taking us on the journey we want, contemplative yes, giving us a sound-scape but only to build the impressive edifice on, not just a barren outlook but some real work attached to it, 'Harvest Moon' almost a big, dark-cornered baronial pile with synths to prick you as you try to leave alongside 'And I Wonder Why' an adventure playground of bass running about, solo wailing away whilst It Bites harmonise in an open chorus.

'Dominion' is probably the dark satanic mill of the album, but that's not to say it has no light in it, real drama is here as fairly new boy Paul Mackie delivers an impressive vocal, a little Sears-like at times and the bass drives a groove with itchy bass and squelchy synths keeping up, peeling away for a stark piano before the kitchen sink is thrown in for a concerted ending; a monolith, but certainly worth the tour. There's 'Wake Up Call' too, simple piano, brittle and shimmering in the morning sun and 'New Life' which has such sinuous beauty that it brings to mind Pink Floyd in their pomp, Niall Matthewson's flowing David Gilmour-like solo a thing of wonder.

This is an effective, unaffected romp through Prog with no side issues, no conformity, just what they want to do. That's the way it should be. They have been getting there through 'The Dreams Of Men' and 'XXV' but these songs sound bigger, more important and purposeful in their circuitous journey.

Pallas are still here, but more than that, they still matter.

Steve Swift

NTH ASCENSION – 'ASCENSION OF KINGS' *(Sonic Vista)* PROGRESSIVE

You cannot accuse Nth Ascension of rushing into things. Born in the North West of England in 2009, from the collaborative musings of Ten's keyboard impresario Darrel Treece-Birch and Craig Walker (drums, percussion), the band have evolved, matured and blossomed into a Prog Rock outfit that would much prefer to trail-blaze than follow their contemporaries.

From those embryonic musings it wasn't long until Alan 'Spud' Taylor (vocals) and Martin Walker (guitars & father of Craig) joined the ranks, adding their already established friendship and writing expertise to the equation. In 2011 they released 'Frequencies Of Day And Night', a demo album that was designed to test the waters... and themselves (and is well worth a listen!). The final piece of the jigsaw arrived in 2012; yet another Walker family member, Gavin (bass & brother of Craig) alleviated Taylor from his bass duties, allowing him to purely focus on vocals alone.

'Ascension Of Kings' is not a concept album, despite what the superb artwork may imply; it does however portray an epic theme of "emancipation over tyranny" throughout the opus. From the opening chords of 'Fourth Kingdom' it's clear that this is something special – a deep, pounding, scything riff enveloped by ethereal keys accompanies Taylor's unique, theatrical, and raconteur vocal delivery (engineered by Ten's Gary Hughes).

'Return Of The King' is one of three instrumental passages that weave together Birch's celestial keys with Martin Walker's multi-toned guitar ingenuity. 'Strange Dreams' picks up the tempo with a driving riff and impassioned vocals symptomatic of the late, great Alex Harvey. 'Overture', 'Realm With A Soul' and 'Seventh Rider' individually construct the 'Clanaan Chronicles' trilogy, a fantasy story penned by Birch back in the 1980s, and now (I have it on good authority) destined to develop on subsequent albums (similar to Saga's 'Chapters') – Parts 1&3 are both exquisite instrumentals, whilst Part 2 displays the melancholic side to Taylor's voice.

'Weight Of The World' is perfectly positioned as the penultimate song; a luscious ballad complete with a transcendent guitar solo that tempers the soul and prepares it for the mammoth, climactic sojourn. 'Vision', originally written in 1991, began life as a relatively short Prog opus; however, the eight minute composition took on a life of its own and developed into the eighteen minute behemoth witnessed here. Quite simply, it's exhilarating; a kaleidoscopic montage which exhibits the top class musicianship of each band member, whilst incorporating a superfluity of styles and rhythmic variations, including an AC/DC style riff!

It's no surprise that these guys are from, (and the album was made) around the Blackpool area, as this really is a tasty piece of Rock with Progressive originality stamped all the way through it!

Dave Crompton

ODIN'S COURT – 'TURTLES ALL THE WAY DOWN' *(D2C Studios)* PROGRESSIVE

Even before a note is played or heard, it's a thumbs up for the intriguing title of 'Turtles All The Way Down' which immediately draws in the inquisitive for the new record by the three piece (plus extras) who make up the U.S.-based Prog Metallers Odin's Court. Together with some stirring cover art by French painter J.P. Fournier, depicting a dice rolling humanimal amidst a derelict wasteland, it's quite a thought provoking start.

As with all OC's previous four releases, the new record is a concept album, on this occasion dealing with mankind's thoughts and understanding about the universe – so no great pressure then. Delivering the goods in just over an hour across three sections addressing "Universe", "Life" and "Everything", it's a surprisingly short, sharp set of songs given a theme which some bands might perhaps address in a much grander gestures of multiple discs and beyond.

Very much the brainchild/baby of guitarist/drummer/keyboardist/programmer etc. Matt Brookins, the songs and the arrangements are much less grandiose than expected from such a weighty concept. Showcasing his guitar skills right from the off (along with fellow axe-man Rick Pierpont) in the first of the three part title track (which introduces each section), the melodies and velvety vocal harmonies of 'And The Answer Is' and '…But What's The Question?' all appear in the opening section and set the standard for the rest of the album which sits at the more melodic and accessible end of the Prog Metal spectrum. '(A Song For) Dragons' lightens proceedings somewhat with the acoustic guitar and piano-based piece kissing the power ballad stone, all big chords and big chorus, yet almost feeling slightly out of place, less polished and maybe included for the sake of ticking a box. 'Life's Glory' is a much more effective piece in the same vein – an emotional and life affirming feel good song, building to a fret-burning and vocal stretching climax.

For those who like their Rock a bit more technical, there's enough on offer to show these guys know how to play, yet the album seems to be constantly on the build up to the epic seventeen minute album closer 'Box Of Dice (Does God Play?)' which sees the band really throwing the kitchen sink at the song. All sorts of mood changes from chunky riffing and not quite extreme but darker gruff vocals through to gentle piano, it's as though they've held back and with the finish line in sight, have decided to go all out to show what they can do in an extended workout.

This is certainly an interesting release from Odin's Court which, without breaking any particularly new ground, will appeal to lovers of the classics.

Mike Ainscoe

OTHERWISE – 'PEACE AT ALL COSTS' *(Century Media)* MODERN/ALTERNATIVE

Otherwise are a Modern Hard Rock band and 'Peace At All Costs' is their sophomore release. The quintet hails from Las Vegas and the debut 'True Love Never Dies' hit the shelves in 2012 to critical acclaim. The album title can be interpreted as "give us peace, or we'll take it from you" and the whole point of the band's musical odyssey is that eternal search for peace.

By 2014 'True...' had shifted nearly sixty thousand units in the U.S.A. and spawned close to three hundred thousand single sales for 'Soldiers', 'I Don't Apologize' and 'Die For You'.

Adrian Patrick (vocals), Ryan Patrick (guitar), Corky Gainsford (drums), Vassillios Metropoulous (bass) and Andrew Pugh (guitar) are confident 'Peace.....' can repeat the

SCORPIONS – 'RETURN TO FOREVER' *(Sony)* HARD ROCK

I can't help but think, listening to this new Scorpions album, that it will be the final piece in their history and the end of an era. Released to coincide with the band's 50th anniversary (take a few seconds to think about that…) there is a lot of melancholy and references to finishing and coming home that one can't ignore. Their last record from 2010, 'Sting In The Tail', was meant to be their last and the ensuing World Tour was their long goodbye, but somewhere down the line Scorpions realised they couldn't give it up, no matter how difficult it was to their aging bodies, and so we had an about turn where they decided to continue touring and make yet another new album.

Of course, whilst 'Sting…' referenced their glorious 1980's period, it certainly seemed at the time that Scorpions were going out with a bang; a quite magnificent, anthemic statement so to try and top that now wouldn't make sense. So, what we have here are some newly recorded versions of songs that were never published and new material written between 2011 and last year, recorded again with producers Martin Hansen and Mikael 'Nord' Andersson that should keep Scorpions fans very happy indeed.

Typical Scorpions Rockers like the declaration 'Going Out With A Bang', the anthemic older-sounding 'Rock My Car' and glorious heavy 'Rock 'N' Roll Band' that bounds along referencing the ideology that was displayed on 'Don't Stop At The Top' from 1988's 'Savage Amusement' clearly show that they haven't watered down their Hard Rocking style. Even 'Hard Rockin' The Place' adds to that Rocking legacy with its 1980's feel suggesting it's a re-worked older song.

Noted for their outstanding ballads over the years, Scorpions give us three bona fide examples in 'House Of Cards', 'Eye Of The Storm', and 'Gypsy Life'. The first is melancholic and wrought with emotion whilst the second is very reflective and when Klaus Meine sings the closing statement "I'm on my way home, it's been way too long – I'm still living in the eye of the storm" it encapsulates where the band's mindset is right now. The latter sees out the album and has very poignant lyrics based on missing life on the road and going back despite losing friends along the way combined with a 'Still Loving You' emotional attachment that Meine is a master of conveying.

Alongside the short and snappy sing-long 'All For One', the heavy rhythmic 'Catch Your Luck And Play' and first single 'We Built This House' full of melancholy and referencing their career, Messers Rudolf Schenker, Meine, Matthias Jabs, James Kottak and Pawel Maciwoda have delivered another fine addition to their Scorpions legacy.

Carl Buxton

success of the debut and they have teamed up with producer David Bottrill (Tool, Staind, Stone Sour) to help get their musical message across as palpably and potently as possible.

I have to confess it took just one play to warm to the Otherwise style on 'Peace…'. Granted it is nothing original (how much of new music can claim that these days?) but when the quality of the material is so high, originality kind of takes a back seat.

'Peace…' carries a nice mix of up-tempo Rockers ('Love & War', 'For The Fallen Ones'), mid-paced moody numbers ('Darker Side Of The Moon', 'The Other Side Of Truth', 'Meet Me In The Dark') and heartfelt ballads ('All The Pretty Things', 'Walk Away'). Even after listening to the album constantly over the course of the last few weeks, it is difficult to pick out a favourite as they change on a daily basis.

Closing track 'Man On Fire' is something of a mini epic, featuring some extended guitar solo work, highlighting in the process just how mature the band's writing ethic actually is; throughout the album, the guitars are powerful and impact greatly. Patrick's vocals suit the material perfectly without being special in any way and at times I'm reminded of a number of American Modern Rock front-men.

Otherwise have toured alongside SS, Papa Roach and Three Days Grace and have also given rousing performances at a number of high profile U.S. festivals such as Rock On The Range, Aftershock and Rocklahoma. I've already stated that 'Peace At All Cost' may lack any real originality, but for me it is certainly preferable to the most recent Nickelback, Adelitas Way and Theory Of A Deadman offerings.

Dave Bott

OUTTRIGGER – 'THE LAST OF US' *(Gain/Sony)* MODERN/ALTERNATIVE

What a phenomenal roster of bands the Gain label has; H.e.a.t, Crashdiet, The Poodles and the brilliant Smash Into Pieces to name just a few. Add to that list a band that you are likely to hear more about in the 2015, the Swedish Modern Rock band Outtrigger. 'The Last Of Us' was named in my top five albums of 2014 for good reason, it's quite brilliant.

With a maturity of sound that defies logic when you consider that the band has an average age of twenty, Outtrigger have found a way of combining several genres into one easily accessible package.

First single 'Superman Is Dead' is a slick melodic Modern Rocker and 'No Excuse' is a fine piece of modern riff-inspired Rock. 'World On Fire' has some growling vocals courtesy of the outstanding Simon Peyron but it also has a chorus so huge that the Grand Canyon would fit into it. 'Echo' is similarly blessed whilst 'You Left As You Came' demonstrates the musical talent on offer right through the band, from John Lofgren's drumming dexterity through to the duel guitar attack of Timmy Andersson and Adam Axelsson… it's dynamically phenomenal.

Okay, there may be a modicum of screaming/growling type vocals on some of the songs but it's measured and done in a way that enhances the songs rather than detracts from them. 'Blame It On You', with yet another hugely melodic chorus, is one such example and yet for straight ahead, fired up, aggressive Melodic Rock is there a better song around at the moment than the superb 'Colder'?

Save for the slightly disappointing 'Awaken Me' – an acoustic re-run of a previously released song – 'The Last Of Us' is a remarkably consistent album through all ten songs with no filler in sight and illustrating the kind of classy genre crossover that seems perfect for 2015.

Mike Newdeck

PAT TRAVERS BAND – 'LIVE AT THE IRIDIUM NYC' *(Frontiers)* ROCK

It seems hard to believe that Pat Travers has been around for nearly forty years. Since his debut album back in 1976, he has consistently delivered his blend of Blues and Rock to great effect. 'Live At The Iridium NYC' showcases that almost perfectly with a well balanced mix of tunes that were recorded a couple of years ago

Opener 'Rock And Roll Susie' goes back to 1977's 'Makin' Magic' album and immediately sets a standard of raw, live energy from the band. The fact that this is a "band" release rather than a solo Pat Travers album means the addition of second guitarist Kirk McKim, as opposed to operating as a power trio as has often been the case. And it's obvious from the off that this format compliments Travers' playing, leaving him free to throw in some blistering guitar solos. 'Gettin' Betta', 'Crash And Burn' and 'Heat In The Street' all date back to 1980 or before, but still sound fresh and vibrant.

There's a couple of tracks from the then current 'Fidelius' release, whilst the second half of the album highlights the Blues roots of the band with sparkling covers of Jimi Hendrix's 'Red House', Robert Johnson's 'If I Had Possession Over Judgement Day' and Howlin' Wolf's 'Spoonful' amongst others. Rodney O'Quinn and Sandy Gennaro hold it all together on bass and drums and McKim is allowed plenty of opportunity to show his own talents in sharing the guitar spotlight. A rousing, sing-along version of Ram Jam Band's 'Black Betty' closes it all off.

The only real question mark over this release is the timing. Recorded in February 2012 it pre-dates both last year's studio album and the 'Live At The Bamboo Rooms' set, so it doesn't really offer up anything new and current. Nevertheless, with its leaning towards Traditional Blues tracks, it does remain a valid edition to the Travers portfolio.

Sure, it's missing some of Travers own standards such as 'Boom Boom' and 'Snortin' Whisky,' but let's face it, there are plenty of versions of these songs out there already. The recording is crisp and clear without sounding clinical and it still manages to capture the warmth and passion of the live show. I'd say this is pretty much a must for the loyal Pat Travers aficionados and a varied set that provides a welcome introduction to those unfamiliar with the band.

Ian Parry

PERSIAN RISK – 'WHO AM I' *(Independent)* HEAVY METAL

NWOBHM was a little like the start of the London Marathon, hundreds of bands started but as time progressed some like Iron Maiden started to reveal themselves as champions, some started well but peaked early and dropped out, others settled for the long haul and some were fun runners, but there was the odd one that clearly had the stamina yet inexplicably just didn't cross the finishing line. Persian Risk was one such band; the auspices were good and despite early line-up changes things settled with the classic line-up of Carl Sentance, Graham Bath, Nick Hughes, Phil Vokins and Steve Hopgood. There was the much lauded album 'Rise Up', TV appearances and tours but incredibly it didn't quite break for them; incredibly because Sentance was, and still is, one of the best Rock vocalists on the circuit. In 2012 he revived PR, released 'Once A King' and now in 2015 follows it up with 'Who Am I'.

Opening with a juicy twin guitar solo, 'Don't Look Back' goes back to their NWOBHM roots, frenetic guitars and rhythm with Sentance's signature screaming vocal stamped over the top. The title track continues in the same high octane vein. 'My Creation' brings a change of pace, a little more Symphonic and epic aided by guest Don Airey on keys, before 'In My Life' brings another change in style, the vocal is more controlled and contained, the riffs and solos power the song through its journey to fade out. 'The Writing On The Wall' is in a Maiden-esque font, Sentance is often likened to Bruce Dickinson which I don't hold with; he has some pretty slick moves of his own, thank you very much. Take a deep breath for 'I Feel Free' because you're going to need it, don't try head-banging either, you'll dislocate something.

'Dark Tower' and 'Calling For You' tie to the beginning in the form of founder member Phil Campbell, the superior production sounds fatter and slicker, but I confess I prefer the edginess of the originals. Stepping slightly out of the box is 'Facing Your Demons', interesting vocal lines and some slightly Proggy guitar gives this a twist. Closing track 'I Thought It Was You' is completely out of left field, nominally the ballad, this smoochy, Jazz-influenced song is the cuckoo in the nest but I'll say this, if some of the big earning Neo-crooners get to hear it, they may choke on their hooch.

Will 'Who Am I' be their legendary album? No it won't, 'Rise…' was probably that album, but if you like very fine vocals and some stonking songs this will hit your sweet spot.

Helen Bradley Owers

PHILL ROCKER – 'HARD TO BLEED' *(Independent)* HARD ROCK

One of the great things about writing for Fireworks is discovering artists in their formative years; I guess it's something akin to unearthing a future football star playing at grass-roots level. A native of Lisbon, Portugal, the appropriately monikered Phill Rocker is one such act and 'Hard To Bleed' is his debut release. It's a fifteen track opus of Metal-edged Heavy Rock interspersed with the occasional heartfelt ballad.

It's impressive enough that vocalist Rocker has written all of the songs himself, put together a bunch of like-minded individuals to form the nucleus of his band, expertly co-produced it along with his rhythm guitar playing cohort Ricardo Fernandes and Tobias Lindell (H.e.a.t, Europe) and independently released the album.

But what's even more impressive is the number of high-profile special guests that add even more gravitas to the proceedings. Brian Tichy (Whitesnake, S.U.N.) is the drummer for all tracks, while his former colleague Doug Aldrich (Whitesnake, Burning Rain, Revolution Saints) augments five songs with his inimitable soloing technique. Former White Lion and Megadeth bassist James Lomenzo appears occasionally, along with a couple of showings from the Guns N' Roses duo of keyboardist Dizzy Reed and guitarist Richard Fortus, while former Judas Priest vocalist Tim "Ripper" Owens adds vocals to 'So Close To Hell' and some Metal screams to the album's heaviest cut 'False Humanity'.

Even without the special guests, this would still be an enjoyable release, the likes of 'Wasted Generation (In Me)', 'Feel Inside My Life', 'Burning In The Fire' and 'Devil On The Loose' are all anthemic Rockers that will liven up any Metal fan's day.

If I have one complaint then perhaps fifteen tracks is rather a lot to digest in one sitting these days, but that said the quality remains consistent throughout. Why not visit www.phillrocker.com to see where you can grab a copy and find out for yourself?

Ant Heeks

PROTECTORS – 'SOUL AND FIRE IS ALL WE EVER NEED' *(Bombed Out)* MODERN/ALTERNATIVE

Let's banish the idea that DIY record labels can't produce decent sounding albums with this, the Wakefield's label offering from the back end of 2014. Featuring ex-Pylon man Chris Charlton on guitar and vocals and produced by Matt Peel (Pulled Apart By Horses), the sound is remarkably dynamic and spacious for a label that's effectively run from a spare bedroom in Harrogate.

Those with a penchant for jangly Indie Pop Rock music will take great delight from this album and there's certainly enough substance for it to have broader appeal than simply its obvious student market.

Opener 'Old Microscopes' provides a haunting hook orientated inception and the chiming (The) Beautiful South-inspired 'Four Sevens' is both beautifully played and conveyed thanks in part to the addition of a female vocalist (Kerry Ramsay).

The album remains eclectic within its Indie Rock genre, boasting the Punkish hue of 'Uniform', 'Reminder' a lilting mid-pacer unafraid to use the spoken word and the danceable 'No Satellites', a song that owes much to The Jam.

Big things start from humble beginnings and although the market for Alternative Indie Rock in the U.K. has perhaps shrunk significantly, there's definitely a place for a band that gives their own unique take on the sound of The House Martins, TBS, Atzec Camera and other eighties and nineties Indie style bands.

Mike Newdeck

PRYTI – 'TALES OF A MELANCHOLIC' *(Independent)* MODERN/ALTERNATIVE

Pryti is a young female singer/song-writer from Birmingham, U.K. Her debut album, 'Tales Of A Melancholic' is to be released in early 2015, with Pryti writing, singing and playing guitar and bass on all ten songs. An EP, 'Welcome To Pariahville', garnered critical acclaim in a number of music magazines when released and this exposure helped raise her profile somewhat, allowing her to secure the services of producer Justin Hill from Sikth (Yashin, Heart Of A Coward, Bury Tomorrow) to help shape the new release's sound.

I was sent the album under advisement that it might be something I would enjoy, but that the material was somewhat downbeat in nature. I have to say, following a couple of plays, these warnings were justified. There is a definite talent on display, of that there is no doubt, but I can't see 'Tales...' troubling the playlists of many Fireworks scribes or the music collections of many Fireworks readers.

There is very little variation in style, song structure or pacing throughout and the dark and moody vibe is both uninspiring and depressing. If you can imagine an energy-free Paramore, with added down-tuned guitars, then it is a good indication of what is on offer.

'Angst' gives a brief glimpse of what is achievable. The crunching riff and huge bottom end, coupled with a powerful drum sound, adds to the song's appeal but it comes too late at track seven to redress the negativities attached to the six tracks that came before. The acoustic intro to 'Ghost' has an air of melancholy that adds something different but when the song kicks into a higher gear we are back in familiar territory. Pryti's one dimensional vocals lack the necessary changes in emotion to give the material the identity needed to easily identify one track from another.

Part of me really admires what Pryti has achieved at such a young age but the appeal of 'Tales Of A Melancholic' is tempered greatly by the overall mood and lack of passion.

Dave Bott

PYTHIA – 'SHADOWS OF A BROKEN PAST' *(Golden Axe)* HEAVY METAL

If accolades were a measure of a band's success then London's Pythia (Greek priestess from the Temple of Apollo) would already be a very successful band because the amount of praise from industry figures and album reviewers is extremely high. However, if Pythia were to be bracketed in the Symphonic Metal category, then they surely aren't quite the measure of the leading lights just yet.

However, we're not comparing like for like. Pythia are Classical/Gothic Metal with Progressive and Power elements and possess, in vocalist Emily Alice Ovenden, a singer who's still involved with number one classical selling artistes Mediaeval Baebes, as well as running her own pub; she could ensure a guaranteed band residency if the pub has a music licence. Co-founders, drummer Marc Dyos and guitarist Ross White, are still present alongside bassist Mark Harrington, who joined after their second album had been completed. But since 'The Serpent's Curse' was released in 2012 and following the 2013 tour supporting Sonata Arctica, lead guitarist Tim Neale and keyboardist Richard Holland departed to be replaced by virtuoso guitarist Oz Wright and the talented Marcus Matusiak. All are seasoned professionals and it shows in the complexity and dexterity of the compositions.

White and Dyos have written the music and allowed the new guys to add their parts and have explored ideas of where they can take their music to create more complex and dynamic avenues. Ovenden is the sole lyricist and writes personal and fantasy lyrics, sometimes allowing the fantasies to be metaphors for real life. Matusiak simply dominates with synths enveloping most of the songs with an underlying orchestral feel whilst Ovenden simply soars all over with her high-end Operatic vocals. That said, in her mellower moments I actually detect an appreciation of Kate Bush such as on the opening verses of the measured and ethereal 'Moon On The Mountain'. The intense, Thrashy riffing courtesy of White and fast picking style from new boy Wright on 'The Key' gives it a powerful feel, not to mention the double bass, Death Metal style drumming of Dyos that gives the album, overall, its intensity.

Fans of Pythia will notice that this is a rawer sounding album as the big layered sound and melody has been stripped back a little, although I feel that they've lost the charm of more melodic songs like 'Sarah (Bury Her)'.

The actor Brian Blessed has been asked back to speak the intro to the dramatic, overblown Operatic 'Sword Of Destiny', whilst Matusiak creates wonderful Renaissance style keys on the rhythmic 'The Highwayman' where Ovenden poetically sings the vocal lines.

If you like excellently played complex, fast-paced, dramatic and Operatic-styled Metal then Pythia is the place to be.

Carl Buxton

RAINBOW – 'A LIGHT IN THE BLACK 1975-1984' *(Polydor/Universal)* HARD ROCK

Polydor are, it would seem, searching once more for that pot of gold at the end of the Rainbow. 'The Polydor Years' vinyl box-set (reviewed in the re-issues section) recently slammed onto the shelves and now 'A Light In The Black' offers "rare tracks, demos, live versions and alternate mixes" from throughout the Rainbow canon. As expected, that isn't quite the case; the underrated Doogie White-led and RCA released 'Stranger In Us All' remains once more beyond reach. However in fairness that still leaves a host of Ritchie Blackmore-infused goodies to discover.

Yet this is a confused box-set, right from the fact that the title track doesn't actually feature, to a running order which switches from tape-hiss demos to proper album cuts via live takes and b-sides. Split into two discs covering the Ronnie James Dio era, one from Graham Bonnet's time with the band and two more which handle Joe Lynn Turner's three releases as front-man, it's hard to get away from the feeling that the many, full, finished and already released cuts from the studio albums have been included simply to pad this set out to five discs, when, in truth, four or possibly even three would have sufficed.

Those negatives aside, the early and "rough mixes" of 'Tarot Woman', 'Stargazer' and 'Run With The Wolf' from the 'Rising' album allude to the creative process the band went through, while the fuzzy but hugely interesting "Bob Daisley" tapes offer a similar insight into the creation of 'Long Live Rock 'N' Roll'. 'Do You Close Your Eyes' is run through without Blackmore, while the album's title track finds Dio ad-libbing the vocals; some of which would stick and some which wouldn't. From this early era you also get an embryonic 'Sensitive To Light' with Blackmore on bass and selection of (previously available) live cuts including the rarely played 'L.A. Connection' and a medley of 'Blues/Man On The Silver Mountain/ Starstruck' which features snatches of 'Purple Haze', 'Lazy' and 'White Christmas'!

Disc three is Bonnet time; an early instrumental version of 'Eyes Of The World' offering little difference to what would end up on the record (although without vocals it does feel much more connected to the Dio era it followed), while 'Ain't A Lot Of Love In The Heart Of Me' is a clunky, alternate vocal of 'Love's No Friend'. A couple of b-sides round out the studio selections, although the interest comes in the shape of "King Biscuit Hour" live tracks, where Bonnet ably handles '...Friend' and '...World'. Although listening to him forget the words to 'Stargazer' at Donington in 1980 (which doesn't feature on the DVD of that set) is more than a little uncomfortable.

Coming off worst are the Turner discs, where a glut of album cuts make up the bulk of the content, while most of the live tracks come from videos released back in the 1980s. That said 'Spotlight Kid' and 'Death Valley Driver' from Hammersmith in 1981 and 'Stranded' from Cardiff in 1984 are great examples of what a superb live performer Turner is. Interestingly, the set closes with a slow, unusual live version of 'Smoke On The Water' which hinted at what was to come for Blackmore, Turner and of course Deep Purple.

As is often the case these days, the promo pack for this release doesn't contain the DVD or booklet, so I can't really comment on them; other than to say that the DVD does appear to be the incomplete version of the previously available VHS tape of Rainbow's 1980 Donington appearance. In truth, a complete CD version of that show, or indeed any full Bonnet or Turner live recording would have made for a more engaging addition to (or indeed complete replacement of) this package and as such feels like a missed opportunity.

While hugely enjoyable, 'A Light In The Black' makes for a very disjointed, stop-start listen, especially for casual fans, as it simply doesn't know if it's a best of, live album or demo set. There are a few gems scattered throughout (although mainly early on), but most of this material is available elsewhere, meaning hardened Rainbow followers will probably own it all already. Leaving the question of exactly who this release is aimed at, definitely lost somewhere in the black.

Steven Reid

STEVE HACKETT – 'WOLFLIGHT' *(InsideOut)* PROGRESSIVE

Steve Hackett's star is in the ascendant; his last two albums ('Out Of The Tunnel's Mouth' and 'Beyond The Shrouded Horizon') being amongst the best of his twenty plus solo album career and his 'Genesis Revisited' enterprise has been a revelation with hundreds of sold out shows in Europe and the Americas over the past two years.

In between these extensive bouts of touring he was still creative; writing and recording 'Wolflight' and once again he's delivered the goods in spades. I felt immensely privileged to be invited to an intimate playback of the album in October and along with the other attendees, I was blown away by what I heard.

For me, one of the many things that draws me to Hackett's music is the sheer variety of sounds and flavours; he may be a guitarist but it's not just about him and a guitar, there's way more depth than that, almost a filmic quality. He's a composer, artist and storyteller, painting pictures with sound.

'Out Of The Body' has those archetypal Hackett guitar refrains he's so good at, moving the track forward melodically not just showing guitar prowess. The lengthy title track mixes styles rather nicely; the gentle verses and chorus have a delightful melody (the vocal harmonies are splendid) which are juxtaposed with both heavier and acoustic instrumental passages. The solos are incisive and clean while Roger King's keyboards underpin the theme.

'Love Song To A Vampire' is the longest track on offer; it starts with classical guitar and multi-layered vocals before a highly addictive, bass heavy chorus ramps up the energy wonderfully. A melodic solo and orchestral stylings are the icing on the cake and there's a twist at the end with a Dream Theater-ish flurry.

Hackett's love of funfairs is evident again on 'The Wheel's Turning', where orchestra features again with another terrific guitar refrain. It's a track where Hackett pushes the boundaries, as is his want and he is known to do. 'Corycian Fire' has a Middle Eastern feel and a lovely driving beat; a Gothic choir is an inspired addition to the piece. 'Earthshine' is a beautiful acoustic track, of which Hackett is a master while 'Loving Sea' is a departure for him being a strummed song in the style of Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young; it's delightful.

'Black Thunder' evokes the Deep South; it's Blues with a great arrangement which brings added depth and interest, not least the wonderful backing vocals. 'Dust And Dreams' has a Funky bass motif courtesy of Nick Beggs and more terrific, quintessential Hackett guitar themes which move seamlessly into the closing 'Heart Song'.

I wish space allowed me to tell you more... just superb!

Gary Marshall

REASON – 'THE DECEPTION OF DREAMS' *(Skyfire)* PROGRESSIVE

Their debut album 'The Dark Star' was very good with a mix of Prog Rock and heavier tunes but on this, their second album, the band from Cheltenham have come up with an even stronger set of songs. They sound like a band; music that is played off each other rather than sent to one another via file-share. Chris Gyngell's guitar and Gil Hird's keyboards duel well but this is not an eccentric take on Prog Rock but one that has the melody to have more of a mainstream appeal; for people who like Threshold this is a treat.

All the songs have choruses that have catchy hooks, something that a lot of Prog bands seem to forget amid the heads down musicianship. 'Nothing' gets a special mention for having two hooks as well as a bruising riff that gives way to a satisfyingly heavy outro. 'Heartless' also has a very effective hook, catchier than many Melodic Rock bands. Paul Mace has a decent set of pipes and does a good job here, although it would've have been better to have his voice a little bolder in the mix. John Townsend is a very good drummer and drives the band well, bringing energy, but is let down by the production of the drum sound. While the bass drums and the cymbals sound fine, it's the skins that sound as if they were recorded through a wall; this means they don't have the punch to match the vibrant music.

What the band do have going for them is an ability to mix up the pace of the songs, giving them the time to build and release tension. 'Revelation' is a good case in point; a sprightly keyboard start evolves into a galloping guitar and drum Rocker. A song like this works on a number of levels; it would go down well live with its heavy approach and impressive musicianship and a chorus could even evoke a sing-a-long. The song 'Souldrift' swings and swells like a stormy ocean and it's a track that is lengthy, atmospheric, heavy and inventive. Not much more you could want from a Prog metal song, is there? There's also not much between songs in terms of quality, maintaining a good standard throughout which makes this an album that you're happy to listen to from beginning to end.

Hopefully, this release will catch the attention of a decent label. They have the chops and songs that deserve a fuller production sound and a wider audience.

Duncan Jamieson

REBECCA DOWNES – 'BACK TO THE START' *(Real2Reel)* BLUES/SOUL

Now, if you want something more Blues-orientated, 'Back To The Start' is absolutely it! The British powerhouse songstress Rebecca Downes possesses one of the purest voices I have heard in a long time!

Reading her bio, I must admit I anticipated a lot from this debut but what I expected didn't happen! Now hold on just a minute because contrary to what you're thinking, it's not in the negative... let me tell you my expectations were more than met and I suspect, like me, this whole album will blow you away. It just keeps building song after song and from the first track onwards, one is continually drawn in due to the sonic brilliance of the production, the skill of the song-writing and the top notch performances of the musical friends that Downes has gathered together.

Downes' voice is certainly pure, and one would think with such purity that the Blues would not be the style for her, but one would be dead wrong! Her voice is so rich, and with an outstanding range that one minute she can make the Blues soar and then turn around and deliver that wispy, whiskey-soaked swagger before she suddenly whispers a song with such power that you will be awestruck!

We can't forget that Downes is not only a powerful vocalist; she's also a finely talented writer. 'Back...' showcases not only her passionate voice but her brilliant song-writing as well. She has the ability to frame words and phrases with a velvet vocal delivery that will go straight to your musical heart! Not only can she belt them out, she can sing them so smooth and, at times, it's like she is whispering the song just to you. Her style of music is Blues, yet she has a groove that just sets forth vibe after vibe of tasteful musical passages that will make you hang on every note and nuance.

'Back...' is a musical journey into the Blues, hitting upon variations of the standards, elevating each song to higher points, with each song full of passion and at times sadness, but every time it's a musical adventure. With the deeper textures hinted at in her voice, one can imagine that she could turn around and blisteringly Rock a number out that would defy all expectations. Does Rebecca do that on this album? Not really, she is content with just building this debut song by song to a stunning crescendo! Maybe on the next one but have no fear, there is still plenty of power on 'Back To The Start'.

This debut album is musically brilliant and vocally stunning and all from a young singer who one suspects could potentially be touching upon legend!

Bruce E.J. Atkinson

RED JASPER – 'THE GREAT AND SECRET SHOW' *(Angel Air)* PROGRESSIVE

Having revitalised their back catalogue, re-issue specialists Angel Air bring us the first all new Red Jasper album in some eighteen years; a long stretch in anyone's reckoning. Unsurprisingly after such a lay off, changes are afoot – and yet so little has moved on.

With front-man Davey Dodds deciding to sit the reunion out, David Clifford has "done a Phil" and swapped his drumsticks for the microphone, the excellent Nick Harradence from Shadowland temporarily manning the kit. Hat's off to Clifford, for while drummers becoming singers in Prog bands is a slow, but ever growing phenomenon, it is a brave move and one he handles well. However what losing Dodds has meant is that a band often referred to as "Marillion meets Jethro Tull", suddenly seems to have almost completely lost their Folky edge, Clifford's style is more traditional early Neo-Prog, or even in places a little New Romantic.

Musically things are also faithfully Neo Prog, Lloyd George's early Marillion-era keyboard sounds bouncing keenly off Robin Harrison's darting guitar lines; making the politically dissatisfied (always an RJ lyrical theme) 'Living The Life' and 'The Great And Secret Show' energetic surges of Prog power. Yet there's something a little awry here. The George/Harrison production is so faithful to this band's roots that the 1980's vibe almost slips beyond retro into dated. Vocals echo, drums clatter, however the, at times, sparseness of the arrangements simply leaves them feeling exposed and far from cutting edge and what could have been a triumphant Prog return feels more like a visit to the past.

However the real frustration comes from the thought that in the hands of a top notch producer (Karl Groom for example), 'The Great And Secret Show' could have been an early contender for 2015 Prog Album Of The Year. 'Bonds Beyond Reason' ebbs and flows beautifully with Soheila Clifford adding strong yet haunting vocals and 'The Time Is Right' finds Pat D'Arcy offering up a rare thing, saxophone in a Prog song and it works quite superbly; his gentle jostle with George's keyboards a genuine joy.

I have to stress that I rate 'The Great And Secret Show' highly enough to revisit it regularly; it's a really good album. However, it could have been so much more...

Steven Reid

REFILL – 'LET'S BREAK SOME HEARTS' *(Audio Labs)* HARD ROCK

Refill is a very energetic and upbeat six-piece with a mix of members from both Ireland and the Netherlands. However, regardless of the dynamism with which they throw themselves into this album, the outcome lacks polish.

'Nowhere To Hide' and 'Can't Break Free' start on the attack but the production lacks a good solid bass sound and Keith Power's vocals tend to be more grating than gruff. 'Chasing Dreams' has a bit more about it in terms of riff and guitar work. Throughout the whole album, however, the guitar rides over a cloud of other noises, often getting stuck in the cloud too. As if they heard my thoughts, 'Show Me Yours' breaks up the sound with clear-cut rhythms in the verse… but only for so long; the what-could-have-been catchy is lost into another screeching single-note chorus.

'The Only One' has a great opening tone; long, lingering and almost wistful. The twinkling licks behind the vocals in the second verse show some creativity too, often lacking in the rest of the album. 'Roseanne' is rather typical of a song-about-a-girl while 'Psycho' breaks into the so-far unexplored territory of distortion and growling vocals. Although not wonderfully executed, I actually liked the contrast of rough guitar and high-pitched vocals; this track at least felt like it had more content and a little less filling. 'The Last Ballad' doesn't quite fit together; at times it flows nicely but at others seems totally out of time. But you've got seven minutes to try and figure that out for yourself. 'Overkill' and 'Love & Lust' feel a little like repeats of earlier tracks.

Unfortunately there aren't many gems to pick out on this album that make it worthwhile. 'Let's Break Some Hearts' isn't polished enough or really memorable to be something you'll get attached to. There's so much going on within each song, let alone on the album as a whole, that it feels disjointed and rushed.

Sophie Brownlee

RENEGADE – 'THUNDER KNOWS NO MERCY' *(Pure Underground)* HEAVY METAL

Renegade is an Italian Metal band with 'Thunder Knows No Mercy' being their fourth album since debuting in 2006. And although it's not a name I've come across before, this is an impressive release that can only further their reputation with some impressive performances contained throughout. Style wise Renegade may not be unique with a combination of Classic Metal and Power Metal and a touch of straight forward Rock thrown in for good measure, but in part it's that variation that helps lift the album above the norm.

'Nobody Lives Forever' is the opening track with its Iron Maiden-like intro before a staccato rhythm throughout the verse gives singer Stefano Senesi a first chance to shine; he provides soaring vocals with a great range and a top end to rival Rob Halford, without losing control of that bit of feeling in the voice. 'The World Is Dying' is a full-on Power Metal blast, kick drums pounding furiously and some intricate guitar work. Although the band are only listed as having one guitarist, Damiano Ammannati, the riffs and lead work intertwine impressively and would surely need a second guitarist to work live.

THE ANSWER – 'RAISE A LITTLE HELL' *(Napalm)* HARD ROCK

The Answer have always been characterised by an ability to walk the walk and talk the talk. They've always looked and sounded the part and it's been a source of amazement to some that they've not yet managed to really hit the big time.

'Raise A Little Hell' is the band's fifth studio album. It's typically robust, has a big sound and, as usual, finds the guys Rocking like they mean it. If anything, however, the collective weight of the songs is more impressive than on previous outings. This could just be their strongest album to date, and maybe, just maybe, it'll do the business for them.

Opener 'Long Live The Renegades' is infused with the spirit of passionate rebellion and will particularly please those who like to hear a bit of bass. As we've come to expect, the band come storming out of the blocks with energy levels super-charged – and they maintain their enthusiasm through the punchy Rocker 'The Other Side', the astonishingly raucous 'Aristocrat', and the well-constructed 'Cigarettes & Regret'. The latter is notable for Paul Mahon's impressive guitar work and wah-wah soloing.

'Last Days Of Summer' is one of the most edgy, angst-infused tracks I've heard from TA, suggesting, perhaps, that as they continue striving for the top and inching forward, experience is informing their art effectively. In contrast, 'Strange Kinda Nothing' almost sounds like a Tony Clarkin (Magnum) track. You can imagine a young Bob Catley banging this one out – not that he's needed; Cormac Neeson's performance, here and indeed throughout, is exemplary.

'I Am What I Am' makes good on the Twisted Sister/Gloria Gaynor-style title to deliver a fine anthemic chorus. Musically it's Whitesnake circa 'Still Of The Night' meets Warrant somewhere in the mid to late 1980s. And that's one hell of a drum sound.

Elsewhere, 'Whiplash' is a solid Rocker which features yet more impressive guitar work, 'Gone Too Long' majors on melody and sentiment ("I apologise for all the shit I've done") and 'Red' benefits from a powerful riff and, at times, almost 10cc-like vocal stylings. 'I Am Cured' opens with a smoky Led Zeppelin riff, while in the spirit of saving the best until last, the title track features a monster riff that grooves and swings from start to finish; it's a track of real substance and timeless class.

'Raise...' is arguably TA's most consistent and accessible album. It's the sound of a mature band in control of their material but still very much excited by it. It should matter to us all that bands like The Answer are at all the best Rock And Roll parties. Hopefully 'Raise A Little Hell' will get them invited to more; it's a glorious noise.

Michael Anthony

THE NEAL MORSE BAND – 'THE GRAND EXPERIMENT' *(InsideOut)* PROGRESSIVE

'The Grand Experiment' signals changes in the Neal Morse camp; being billed as The Neal Morse Band is an obvious one, another being a different approach to the song-writing. Hitherto Morse has all the material written before recording commences; this time nothing was developed beforehand, the band convened and created the songs together.

Sound wise there are some different flavours in evidence which I suspect is a consequence of this new creative process and the individuals involved; the technical and heavier influences of Mike Portnoy (drums) and Eric Gillette (guitars & vocals) coming through in certain instances; Randy George (bass) and Bill Hubauer (keyboards & vocals) making up the highly accomplished quintet.

'Following The Call' is an exquisite opening with all the hallmarks of Morse at his best. The A Cappella section which starts the song is delightful, more redolent of The Eagles covering 'Seven Bridges Road' than the usual Gentle Giant variant. When the organ and synth motifs kick in you know you're in for something special as they ooze melody; but then it gets even better with Gillette's wonderful guitar refrain. The chorus is glorious and the way the instrumentation works together is joyous, as is the switch to a quiet middle section which then bursts into a heavier piece dripping with synths, Mellotron sounds and a Dream Theater-esque break where Gillette shines. The synth solo is magnificent too. It all equates to ten minutes of near perfection.

The title track sees a new side of Morse. The verses, and guitar solo, are in a Hard Rock vein while the bridge and chorus are typical Morse. 'Waterfall' is a beautiful acoustic number that rivals Spock's Beard's 'June'; the vocal arrangement is fantastic. The chiming guitars evoke early Genesis while the multi-layered vocals on the chorus are wonderful. The keyboard outro smacks of Genesis but circa the 'Wind & Wuthering' album.

'Agenda' is perhaps the most radical departure from Morse's usual style, not least because of its brevity. Processed vocals and a modern, heavy guitar riff juxtaposed with a Beatle-ish chorus.

Having opened with a mini epic the album closes with a major one, in every sense of the word, with 'Alive Again' clocking in at twenty six minutes, although it feels shorter. Again it has everything one has come to expect from Morse plus some of those newer, heavier elements. Multiple compelling themes and refrains abound and are combined seamlessly to make a glorious whole; interestingly Morse shares lead vocal duties. Another Dream Theater-esque instrumental section is superbly delivered, as one would expect.

As always with Morse related tunes they were in my head immediately. This is quite possibly Album Of The Year already!

Gary Marshall

But it's that work in the studio that really makes this album standout. Not that it seems created or false at all, it's just superbly produced and arranged. The sound and guitar tones are sharp and yet the bass lines also have a prominent place in the mix. The arrangements and time changes work well, with a couple songs having a slower mid-section and bass driven rhythms to support the Maiden-influences. There's also subtle keyboards in the mix, not enough to be intrusive, but clearly providing a touch of harmony under all the raw power and a clear indication of the care and craft that has gone into the making of this album.

'Trail Of Tears' is a near nine minute epic, but the album ends with a couple of highlights with the full paced 'Screaming On The Edge' and the title track itself a more mid-tempo, brooding powerful Rocker.

These eight tracks all have something to offer; reminiscent of early Queensryche at their best, Renegade have produced a classy album with that rare mix of raw power and subtlety. It's well worth a listen for any Metal fan.

Ian Parry

ROBIN TROWER – 'SOMETHING'S ABOUT TO CHANGE' *(V12)* BLUES/SOUL

I first came across Robin Trower in my late teens whilst I was sitting with friends round at someone's flat (late one night), we were pulling vinyl out of their collection and playing whatever cover looked interesting (that's how we rolled then kids). It was the early hours of the morning and 'Bridge Of Sighs' was something of a revelation, I'd never heard of him but was instantly smitten, who wouldn't be listening to some of the most sublime, soulful fret-work ever. For years after, when asked about my musical taste I included 'Robin Trower' and most times the response was "who?"; every now and then someone would say "YES!" and it felt like an exclusive little club of Trower fans.

Rarely did I introduce his work to guitar fans without them becoming smitten too. As time went on Trower became even less visible and I must confess by the time of 'Truce' and a change in lifestyle (less nights sitting until the early hours with friends listening to music and more getting much needed sleep), he'd slipped off my radar somewhat; although never completely forgotten. I've caught him live several times over the years and he never disappoints. 'Something's About To Change' is due to be released on the 9th March to coincide with Trower's 70th birthday which in itself is pretty cool. The 'Riff No. 7 (Still Alive)' lyric "bruised, but still alive" probably sums up a seventy year life pretty neatly.

'...Change' is as smooth and warm as wax slowly dripping down a candle. It will come as no surprise that Trower is still the most soulful, feeling virtuoso on guitar (and here on the bass too). The bedsit and cheap beer may have been replaced by a leather sofa and a bottle of good red and the early hours replaced by a more respectable 10pm, but the smoochy, slow Blues will wrap you up like an old afghan and mellow you against the world's anxieties. This is the musical equivalent of lying in a row boat with your hand trailing in the water; its relaxation but for grown-ups.

It's not going to be mistaken for 'Bridge Of Sighs' or 'Victims Of The Fury' but it will soothe your soul none the less.

Helen Bradley Owers

ROCKAMAMA – 'ROCKAMAMA' *(Independent)* BLUES/SOUL

It's good time Rock 'n' Blues from this tight little Brazilian outfit. Despite many musicians' woes about what the internet has done to their livelihood, one positive aspect that the web has brought is the ability of bands from all corners of the globe to get noticed.

Starting out as a Blues and Rock cover band, Rockamama have evolved into writing all their own material. This release is nicely packaged, with lyrics and band poster included and the album and music itself is an enjoyable way to while away the time with a glass of the hard stuff in your hand or perhaps more appropriately... a Caipirinha.

Their Blues contains a heavy dose of Rock and although their press release suggests Brazilian music in the mix, that's not much of that in evidence here. They sound more like a band born and bred in the bars of the U.S. than the land of Samba.

Kicking off with perhaps their best song 'Alcohol', it has the mean riff and the Boogie approach of George Thorogood; there's also some spicy slide playing on this track. They sound like they're having a ball on tracks like 'Crazy Lady' and 'Devil's Bar' whilst 'Keep Rubbin" is a rollicking Rock 'n' Roller designed to get any bar jumping.

'Outcome' sees them go down a more straightforward Hard Rock route which is enhanced by an uplifting solo that raises the temperature and demonstrates what all good Blues bands need; a guitar tone that tweaks your emotions. The vocals are sturdy, a little rough and ready in places, but not to the detriment of the music as this brand of music often works better with a bit of grit.

This won't change the world but if you're in a Blues mood this has enough diversity in terms of composition and playing, plus a sense of fun that all adds up to make this a hearty stew (or should that be Feijoada?) of tasty Blues.

Duncan Jamieson

ROCKET SCIENTISTS – 'REFUEL' *(Think Tank Media)* PROGRESSIVE

It's been a while between Rocket Scientists studio albums ('Oblivion Days' in 1999 and 'Revolution Road' their last in 2006), then we get two releases in quick succession with the instrumental EP 'Supernatural Highways' and now this twelve track opus. The core band of Erik Norlander (keyboards, vocals), Mark McCrite (vocals, guitars), Don Schiff (NS Stick, bass, cello, viola, mandolin) is joined by guests that include Gregg Bissonette (drums), Lana Lane (lead, backing vocals) and Kelly Keeling (vocals).

The short instrumental title track opens the album and showcases Norlander's prowess with a range of different keyboards while McCrite provides a tasty guitar solo. 'She's Getting Hysterical' is full of parping synthesisers that bring Asia to mind as does the vocal refrain on the verses. The use of strings hints at ELO while the trumpet at the end gives a Latin feel.

'Martial' has an effective riff and pleasing vocal melodies which put me in mind of ArcAngel/Cannata, a comparison that crops up a few times across the album. 'It's Over' is a personal highlight; a gentle acoustic opening underpinned by delicious bass and a plaintive vocal from McCrite. The doubling of some vocal lines on the upbeat chorus is a great touch as is the unexpected leap into a Prog Metal-ish finale.

'Regenerate' is another instrumental which features terrific bass lines, hardly surprising considering it was written by Schiff. It has a filmic quality; one can imagine it being used as a soundtrack. The guitar works has touches of Steve Hackett to it while 'The Fading Light' is a touch ponderous until it picks up pace half way through and the instrumental sections deliver.

'The World Waits For You' opens like Styx doing a Tommy Shaw song; it's led by acoustic guitar with piano coming in latterly and underscored by a nice string arrangement, a theme carried over into the instrumental 'Reconstruct'. I'm not too sure about 'Cheshire Cat Smile', certainly Keeling provides a better vocal performance than we witnessed at Firefest X but the song feels somewhat lightweight in places with the keyboards being all too reminiscent of Jeff Wayne's theme tunes to TV programmes such as 'The Big Match'.

'Rome's About To Fall' begins with some evil sounding strings which give way to a solid guitar riff. Some Rick Wakeman-esque synth soloing is pretty choice and I like how the mood changes midway. 'Galileo' is the last of the instrumentals on offer where Norlander gives his armoury of keyboards a workout.

The album concludes on a high thanks to the presence of Lane's vocal power in 'The Lost Years'; she is by far the best vocalist on the album.

Gary Marshall

SANTA CRUZ – 'SANTA CRUZ' *(Spinefarm)* HARD ROCK

The second album from Finnish Sleaze Rockers Santa Cruz is actually self-titled, which may be a little confusing for people new to the band as self-titled albums tend to be debuts. I very much enjoyed their first outing, ('Screaming For Adrenaline') and I saw lots of promise in their Sleazy Rock 'n' Roll style. This album sees them push their song-writing forward into more commercial territory; it's less raw and they have a more polished and a louder, distinctive melodic edge.

Don't get me wrong, this is still full-on Sleaze with crunching guitars oozing rebellion and spitting attitude, but its far slicker and smoother. They have cranked up the harmonies and silky melodies and some of these tracks scream "radio hit gold". I found this album as a whole more instant and enjoyable than its predecessor, tracks like 'We Are The Ones To Fall' and 'Wasted And Wounded' quickly scored well with me and have received lots of repeat plays on my stereo.

It's an album full of adrenaline fuelled Rockers, lots of exciting energy and a rebellious spirit that will have fists pumping. The harmony drenched, melody heavy choruses are sure to make them a hit with that strong anthemic feel to them and I'm sure they'll get feet stomping and voices singing along in union; the vast majority of these songs have the potential to be killer live!

'Bonafide Heroes' and 'Velvet Rope' are rabble-rousing, pounding Sleaze with sing-along choruses and soaring harmony vocals that open the album with an enticing bang whilst 'My Remedy' has a quirky slant to it but it is still really infectious. The ballad – 'Can You Feel The Rain' – is the closing track and I think this was a wise move as it allows the contagious energy of the rest album to keep momentum. So this one slows things down but it doesn't see a dip in quality; in fact it is one of my stand out tracks with a delicate and beautiful melody that I find it very emotive and touching. It builds to an anthemic power ballad type chorus and I'm sure even the most hardcore Sleaze fans will be won over by the bands softer side.

It's a cracking album which is well worth cranking up and raising your voice to. If Sleaze is your thing, trust me you want to get on this ASAP!

Paul Woodward

SERIOUS BLACK – 'AS DAYLIGHT BREAKS' *(AFM)* HARD ROCK

The names Urban breed, Roland Grapow, Dominik Sebastian, Mario Lochert, Jan Vacik and Thomen Stauch will probably be quite familiar to a lot of Fireworks readers. They have been at one time or another members of bands such as Helloween, Masterplan, Tad Morose, Blind Guardian and Edenbridge to name but a few. This outfit are slightly different from your usual put together "super-group" in that this isn't a project affair but a fully-fledged band.

The whole thing came about when Grapow and Lochert were having a drink and the latter said that he'd had the idea of bringing together like-minded musicians to form a new band. A few weeks later Grapow and Lochert started to contact their friends, asking them to join their new group and from that humble start Serious Black was born.

What is also different about this release is that each of the musicians took part in every aspect of the album, from the song-writing and recording to the production; everyone was fully involved and what an end result they have come up with. As would be expected from six such recognised and respected musicians, this is a release with some commanding but very, very Melodic Metal that is filled to over flowing with hooks and riffs that you'll want to hear repeatedly.

Some of my favourites include the piano-led, slow burning Rocker 'Sealing My Fate' where breed lets us know why he's considered one of the best Metal singers in the business, the Eastern-tinged 'Akhenaton' with its superb multi-layered musicianship, clever melodies and strong chorus and the short, sharp shock of 'Trail Of Murder' which is three minutes of hard hitting keyboards, guitars, bass and drums all topped off with another killer vocal. Don't however think that SB are a one trick Metal pony. Take a listen to 'As Daylight Breaks' for a full-on, melodic AOR ballad that features an orchestra and one of breed's best vocals, or 'Listen To The Storm' where once again the band slow things down to enhance the dramatic effect of this wonderful song, proving that even though they'll be mostly described as a Metal band, they can write songs that would put many a Melodic Rock act to shame.

Serious Black have recorded a terrific album, one that has a lot of songs whose breadth and depth will surprise many fans of the members' previous work. But if you like surprises, then their take on the more Melodic side of Metal could be something you'll really enjoy.

Ian Johnson

SHADOWBANE – 'FACING THE FALLOUT' *(Pure Steel)* HEAVY METAL

At Christmas there's nothing quite like a big slap up food fest and going overboard with all the trimmings. After a few days however it's quite a relief to get back to normal and have something more basic, you really can't beat a nice plate of beans on toast.

The same theory can apply to music; it's certainly great to hear over blown, grandiose Symphonic Rock with bombastic orchestras and raging choirs or wonderfully complex, Prog epics that move from tempo to tempo and through different moods and atmospheres at the drop of a hat. Yet there's something immensely satisfying about some good old, down to earth, no messing Metal. No orchestras, keyboards or strings just riffs, drums and more riffs. Well, Shadowbane might just be the perfect antidote to all the fragmentation and sub-genres that have sprung up over the years.

'Facing The Fallout' is the debut release from the Hamburg-based five-piece as 'Red Alert' sets the scene with sounds of a post-apocalyptic wasteland before kicking in with 'Beyond The Winds Of War' and what a cracking way to start their first album. Huge riffs, thumping double bass drums and suitably menacing vocals all wrapped up in a powerful, punchy production show that Shadowbane mean business. 'Traitor' is even better with more hammer-hard drumming and twin guitar riffage that gets suitably brutal during an inspired chorus.

There's a big NWOBHM-influence throughout the album with Iron Maiden, Heavy Load and Angel Witch being suitable references all wrapped up in a reassuring Metal coating that would do 'Painkiller' era Judas Priest proud. Vocalist Stefan may have a limited range, yet his voice suits the music perfectly, coming across like a more melodic Paul Di'Anno or Blaze Bayley with, surprisingly enough, a little twist of Johnny Rotten just lingering in the background on occasions.

Anyone wanting to check out the band would be strongly advised to listen to 'Dystopia'; an absolute steam roller of a track with a razor sharp riff that heads into a glorious Eastern-tinged harmony that will stay buried in your head for weeks, before slamming into the main course. The twin guitars of Lukas and Markus soar and scream, trading off each other like the best of Tipton and Downing before more power house riffing brings things to a cataclysmic ending. This is quite stunning.

Shadowbane have come right out of the blue to start the year off a veritable bang and 'Facing The Fallout' acts as a reminder as to why we fell in love with this type of music in the first place. Their no frills, head down brand of Metal is a breath of fresh air and comes highly recommended.

Mick Burgess

SMASH INTO PIECES – 'THE APOCALYPSE DJ' *(Gain/Sony)* MODERN/ALTERNATIVE

Follow up to 2013's excellent debut album 'Unbreakable' sees Sweden's Smash Into Pieces up the ante on an album that should appeal to all those with a love of bands like Creed, Emphatic and Alter Bridge. 'The Apocalypse DJ' feels more cohesive than its predecessor having been written from scratch rather than featuring old songs re-done from previously released material.

Chris Adam Hedman Sörbye still emulates Scott Stapp, most noticeably on catchy first single 'Disaster Highway', but it's the quality of the songs that make this band stand out from the crowd. The album opens in emphatic style with the punchy Metallic offering 'Stronger', 'My Cocaine' sees Amaranthe's Elize Ryd add her impressive vocals whilst 'Checkmate' provides the compulsory power ballad moment.

As you would expect from a Swedish Rock act, the musicianship is first rate, particularly on the Alter Bridge riff mongering of 'Don't Wake Me Up' or the Creed-like 'Reaching Out'. The production is top notch, bringing out the keyboard fills above the guitar crunch on the superb 'Bullets' or the aggressive 'Burn' and it's really only on the very last song that you hear any noticeable dip in quality. To be fair, that's really only due to the brilliance of what's come before because it's really not that bad at all.

The burgeoning Gain roster really does have some fantastic bands, perhaps testimony to their excellent A&R department. Smash Into Pieces should be right up there as one of the label's marquee bands because this is one of the best albums that it has released so far. It's only February but already I'd wager that this will be in my top five albums of 2015 because it's utterly essential for fans of Modern Hard Rock.

Mike Newdeck

THE VAL – 'HEADING FOR THE SURFACE' *(Independent)* MELODIC ROCK

Reviewing The Val's debut album 'Back' a year or so ago was a frustrating experience, borne out of the fact that the majority of tracks on the album were acoustic-based, yet one could instantly hear the potential these songs had to be massive if just a little bit more edge and drive had been added. Well, here we are with the band's second release, and it seems somebody listened.

Make no mistake, this is one superlative, powerful album, drenched in lush melodies and under-pinned with some of the most emotive and wonderful guitaring from Alfonso Samos that I have heard in a long, long time. Add to this the powerful, expressive, delightful and accent-free vocals of Gabrielle de Val and you have an album that sits alongside Heart's best in the Female-Fronted Melodic Rock pantheon.

My only nit-pick would be the running order, with the more up-tempo, and dare one say, better tracks appearing from the middle of the album. That's not to say the opening tracks are poor, far from it. Main opener after the intro 'Wish You All the Best' is a jaunty melodic track, powerful without being heavy, while the following 'Crusaders' has happy upbeat melodies at odds with its lyrical theme. 'Roses And Chains' meanwhile has an almost Folk melody, evoking comparisons with Blackmore's Night, but it's with 'Up To Where U Are' that the album really takes off, de Val's vocal attitude channelling Ann Wilson and Jaime Kyle, complete with highly infectious chorus and tasteful solo.

'She's Dumb And Blind' is a strange title, but a fabulous song, though if truth be told sails a little close to the wind with it's resemblance to Heart's 'These Dreams' in the verses, although turned around by the massive chorus and more delightful soloing. 'Stardust' is the only blot in my copybook being the typical, sultry, female Bluesy number that I really can't abide but subsequent tracks, like the Robin Beck/Jack Ponti flavoured 'I Saw Him First' and the achingly familiar melody of 'My Heart Is Beating', soon put matters back on the right track. 'Breathe Me In' is an emotional mid-tempo track with wonderful musical touches, and very much like something you'd expect from Michelle Branch or her ilk, and definitely a hit in waiting. Bringing up the rear, 'Wreckage Of My Heart' sees The Val put the pedal to the metal but doesn't quite work as well as what's come before, while final track 'Borderline' is a short, simple acoustic number, a delightful throwback to the debut.

Bottom line, colour me impressed...very impressed, with the band giving us what, for me, is one of the best Female-Fronted Melodic Rock albums I've heard in years.

Bruce Mee

SOTO – 'INSIDE THE VERTIGO' *(earMusic)* HARD ROCK

"I'm just not in a "touch your golden hair" mood right now!" quotes Jeff Scott Soto. JSS is back and he's quite pissed off about a lot of things. For a number of years, he's dealt with a lot of anger and frustration and so SOTO (the band) is his outlet to release some of this pent-up emotion. This is dark. This is a return to his heavier roots. This is modern, down-tuned aggressive Metal that, in many places, is like a heavier version of Talisman... but without the Funk; this is as far removed from 'Love Parade' as it gets!

Here, he is backed up by his current touring band featuring the exquisitely talented Spaniard Jorge Salan on lead guitar (who's played with Fiona and Robin Beck), Brazilians BJ (guitar and keys) and Edu Cominato (drums) from Tempestt (from his 2002 Brazilian solo tour) and New York native David Z (Zablidowsky) on bass (ZO2/Rubix Kube/T.S.O.) whom he became acquainted with from the T.S.O. rehearsals.

It's been stated that the band have brought all their influences from Europe (Salan) the U.S. (Soto and Zablidowsky) and South America (BJ and Cominato) in to play on this record. Add into the mix Gus G (Firewind/Ozzy), Jason Bieler (Saigon Kick), Mike Orlando (Adrenaline Mob) and Joel Hoekstra (Night Ranger/T.S.O./Whitesnake) who play on the songs they co-wrote with JSS and you have a monster on your hands. Also appearing as guests or co-writers amongst others are Casey Grillo (Kamelot), Leo Mancini (Tempestt) and his long-time buddy Gary Schutt, which begs the question how could it possibly fail?

Naturally, with an "all-star cast" propelling the talented players along, this is a rip-roaring beast with 'Final Say', 'Wrath' and 'Narcissistically Yours' all down-tuned, dark and heavy slabs of in your face aggression with JSS's on-point vocals reminding you that this is the man lauded as one of the finest Hard Rock vocalists out there so he can pretty much do as he pleases.

The song titles alone allow you to understand what JSS is getting off of his chest. 'Trance' and 'Jealousy' show no let off as heavy, dark and intense is on the menu. However, if you think it's all modern and Alternative substituting for Hard Rock then think again; Salan's solos are impressive, full of melody, fluidity and style. The title track is creative, brooding, ethereal and mood evoking, 'When I'm Older' is typical Soto – a flowing melodic semi-ballad and 'Fall To Pieces' is a Hard Rocker that rhythmically races along. 'End Of Days' though is his piece de resistance; epic on a grand scale with mood, emotion, orchestral elements and dramatically delivered – has JSS written a finer song?

This album will surprise and delight in equal measure!

Carl Buxton

SPACE VACATION – 'COSMIC VANGUARD' *(Pure Steel)* HEAVY METAL

When I first gave this a spin, my initial thoughts leaned towards thunderous European Heavy Metal akin to something along the lines of Hammerfall. So when I was doing some background research I was shocked to learn that they weren't Scandinavian as I had simply presumed... Space Vacation actually hail from San Francisco in the U.S.A. These guys are new to me and what I had presumed was a debut album is actually the third opus from these NWOBHM-influenced Metalheads.

Their eighties-influences hit you in the face from the offset, their song-writing is not faded or dated but you can clearly hear these guys grew up on the likes of Iron Maiden and Judas Priest. I stand by my initial statement that these guys have a strong thunderous Euro

Heavy Metal thing going on, bombastic, pompous and occasionally overblown; at times the Maiden-influence, mainly in the guitar style, is really apparent. Lots of galloping rhythms which keep the energy levels high and yes, it can be really heavy in its pounding backbeat but it's never aggressive and like their influences remains strongly melodic.

Guitar fans will love what Kiyoshi Morgan is up to on 'Cosmic Vanguard' as there is plenty of fast and furious, widdly guitar licks, hooks and solos that will really engross guitar lovers. I really like vocalist Scott Shapiro's voice as well, it's very smooth so therefore very melodious and unlike many of the influences, he definitely flows more towards being a singer than a screamer. That said, there are plenty of massive bombastic soaring vocals, it's just not in scream mode... it's in a more commanding, contained way, much like many of the Euro Metal bands I could compare these guys to.

There is some nice diversity in how they structure their songs as well, 'Get Down' for example has a straight-forward Hard Rock style chorus but it's wrapped up in a driven Metal structure. 'The Living Damned' is probably the most instant song on the album; it has a very infectious flow with some engrossing guitar riffage and an absorbing chorus. Another highlight for me is the stomping chorus of the Maiden-infused 'Say My Name'.

It's a pretty decent and reasonably solid album with a flow that never dips in quality so there are no tracks that stand out as fillers. Fans of NWOBHM, 1980's old-school Melodic Heavy Metal and Grandiose Euro Metal, will love 'Cosmic Vanguard'.

I have to admit the band name and that album title did put me off initially and made me instantly think this was going to be some Psychedelic Prog album. Thankfully it's not and Metal fans should definitely give it a whirl.

Paul Woodward

SPIRIT LEVEL – 'KOLOSSI BLUES' *(Independent)* BLUES/SOUL

Mr Joe Bonamassa... Mr Philip Sayce... Ms Joanne Shaw Taylor... Mr Virgil McMahon with assorted Accelerators... Mr Jarekus Singleton.

I repeat these names because Messrs Chris Louvieris and Chris Kyriacou stand behind those Blues behemoths. In fact you see that second line for other Blues Willmakeits? Not there... the next line for Blues Mightnotmakeits? That's the one... bring your flask, it's going to be a long wait.

Louvieris feels he has the right to play the Blues. Well, he opened a club which was destroyed by a freak storm, his house burned down and another house was destroyed when a military plane crashed into it. Now, I don't want to add to the misery and to be fair he and session mainstay Kyriacou have put together a couple of semi crackers; the strutting Big Organ Blues of 'What You See Is What You Get' and the gently beautiful Folky air of 'She's So Hot' with a 1970's commerciality and "almost" Eagles quality harmonies.

Generally though, this just rushes to slow Blues workouts or grabs Boogie Blues off the peg. Oh, or stripped back heartrending Blues. Not saying this isn't well produced and delivered, it's damn near excellent, but this has so much that we expect, it should have a regular place on an evening chat show like 'The One Show'.

So many Blues merchants out there are whipping up tasty offerings these days, Rocking it up, Funking it out, stripping it back; basically you need to produce something different and special to be in with a shout. Yes, Spirit Level occupy a place; its old style Blues but those people mentioned earlier have that covered and they do so much more. They are taking Blues somewhere, not venerating what it used to be.

Nothing stands still, least of all music or fans. Blink and you might find they've moved on.

Steve Swift

STARGAZERY – 'STARS ALIGNED' *(Pure Legend)* HARD ROCK

The irresistible force paradox; what happens when the unstoppable force meets an immovable object? This paradox can be applied to 'Stars Aligned', the sophomore release by Finnish band Stargazery, by simply substituting the "unstoppable force" with "melody" and the "immovable object" with "Metal"; both strive to take over this album yet they find a way to co-exist in perfect harmony.

I am happy to report of another album with fantastic production that was mastered by Minerva Pappi and makes reviewing so much easier. The band cite Rainbow and Black Sabbath (Tony Martin era) as major influences and the latter can be heard throughout the album without ever directly parodying their idols. Those with a predilection for old-school, Classic Metal/Hard Rock, in the style of early Rainbow, Dio, Black Sabbath and Whitesnake will find lots to love about this album.

'Voodoo' sets out the stall with huge vocals from ex-MSG vocalist Jari Tiura and even bigger keyboards courtesy of Marco Sneck. An early highlight is the dramatic 'Angel Of The Dawn' where Tiura really comes to the fore. The heavy keyboards on 'Missed The Train To Paradise' interplay perfectly with the storming guitars of Pete Ahonen (Burning Point/Ghost Machinery). The thumping rhythm section of bassist Jukka Jokikokko and drummer Jussi Ontero literally melt through the speakers making '...Aligned' one of those albums where you are continually wanting to turn up the volume; this is best highlighted on the tracks 'Absolution' and 'Invisible', the latter also including a phenomenal Tony Carey style keyboard solo. Any naysayers that think keyboards have no place in Metal seriously need to take a listen to this album.

The quality rarely dips from the extreme power-ballad of 'Academy Of Love' with its blistering guitar solos to the huge, larger than life chorus of 'Painted Into A Corner' to the perfect, ultra-catchy European Melodic Metal of 'Dim The Halo'. Everything about this album is colossal and 'Bring Me The Night' is a perfect example of where everyone tries to outdo one another in terms of power and it all comes together in a beautiful, melodic, illogical cacophony.

The Hammond Organ drenched 'Hiding' has a Whitesnake vibe and 'Warrior's Inn' features an anthemic chorus. The album ends with the Romany feel of the Cher cover 'Dark Lady' that could easily be a Eurovison entry which would have most running for the hills, however, remember Stargazery's country of origin. 'Tumma Nainen' is included as a special bonus track sang in their native tongue which is another version of the previous song 'Dark Lady'.

With 'Stars Align', Stargazery have laid down the benchmark for high quality Melodic Metal for 2015.

Mark Donnelly

STORMWITCH – 'SEASON OF THE WITCH' *(Massacre)* HEAVY METAL

This is another solid entry in this German Metal band's canon. This is their tenth studio album, with front-man Andy Mück being the only original member to have been there throughout (original guitarist Lee Tarot died in 2013). However, the changing line-up hasn't affected their overall sound much at all.

It doesn't get more Traditional Metal than this with its unashamedly NWOBHM riffs, high octane squeals and fantasy lyrics with some added Teutonic muscle. While there might not be anything new under the sun (or should that be moon?) here, it's reassuring to know Metal like this remains as permanent as the gravestone on the album's cover. In the past, the band has flirted with a more keyboard and Power Metal approach at times but for 'Season Of The Witch' they've gone back to their core sound.

It's the first album for Stoney Stoner (the guitarist) and he gives us old-school riffs and solos of a vintage where melody and dexterity combine; a touch of widdle here and there but never losing sight of a tunefully constructed instrumental passage. The galloping riffing of 'Evil Spirit' and 'Last Warrior' have a touch of Iron Maiden about them as does 'The Trail Of Tears' which manages to mix that Maiden-influence together with a touch of Europe's 'Cherokee'.

For a band who wear the loincloth of true Metal, they are capable of ballads such as 'Runescape' and the digi-pack bonus track 'Different Eyes' which are surprisingly sensitive and work well in creating a well-rounded album. Mück's vocals have character, sometimes delivering some Rob Halford-esque, helium-filled screams and at other times he sounds menacing like those butlers that would open the door in old horror movies.

Simple but effective choruses such as those found on 'True Until The End' and the throbbing Rocker 'At The End Of The World' (which grooves like a zombie) might work best for the band while the straightforward 'Taliesin', with its coffin scratching riff, and the title track are more pedestrian plodders. They do (welcomingly) get a bit heavier at the end of the record on the Thrashy other bonus track 'The Singers Curse'.

Thirty-five years on, Stormwitch still have the power to cast you under their spell.

Duncan Jamieson

STRANGELET – 'FIRST BITE' *(Independent)* HARD ROCK

These Southern Germans deliver late 1980's/early 1990's-inspired Hard Rock/Melodic Metal with a youthful exuberance on this their confident debut. It's got a meaty production sound that gives a consistently solid thump to Tobias Eurich's riffing.

There are some big gang-chant vocals on the choruses of 'Pray To Break' and 'Nothing' which also has more cowbells than a dairy farm. There's an old-school Rock 'n' Roll buzz that strays into the Sleaze of Guns 'N' Roses or even Hardcore Superstar in places; take for instance the guitar solo on 'Stillborn' which evokes Slash.

Elsewhere the influences sound like they shouldn't work together but they somehow do. There's a definite Metallica sound, in most part down to Stefan Zörner's vocals, on 'Tainted' and some harder riffing although the song turns down an unexpected alley when it whips out a very Green Day sounding chorus. Another comparison has to be Uriah Heep due to the heavier Bluesier influence and grinding organ sound on both 'Hell & Back' (which also includes a harmonica jam) and 'Catching Fire'. The keyboard-led 'All That's Left' even conjures up Chris de Burgh's 'A Spaceman Came Travelling' of all things!

What gives them a stronger unique identity is Zörner, he's high in the mix and he really colours the whole record. He's got one of those voices that is multi-faceted, going from Rock to Metal to "cookie cutter" of sorts. Interested in the likes of King Crimson and Genesis, Zörner brings a sound that means it doesn't sound as generic as some other Melodic Rock

THUNDER – 'WONDER DAYS' *(earMusic)* ROCK

They're back! Oh, they've gone again. They're back again! Oh, it's just an old live album and a couple of shows… They're back again! Oh it's just a tour with Journey and Whitesnake, they won't do an album… Oh yes they will!

Though they're one of the most endearing bands to emerge from ol' Blighty, Thunder have had an on/off existence in the more recent part of their twenty-five year career. They went out with a 'Bang!' in 2008 and have appeared sporadically for the odd show here and there, but following last year's arena tour, the lure of a new album was too much to resist and 'Wonder Days' is the result. Sadly guitarist Ben Matthews was unable to take part in the sessions due to tonsil cancer, but happily he's now on the mend and has been given the all-clear. Luke Morley performed all guitar and keyboard duties, aided and abetted as usual by vocalist Danny Bowes, who turns in his regular wonderful performance, along with the stalwart rhythm section of drummer Harry James and bassist Chris Childs.

'Wonder Days' is just about everything you would expect from a Thunder album, but with a few refreshingly unusual elements woven into the traditional Blues Rock for which that band are known for. By now, I would have thought everybody had heard the first single 'Wonder Days' with its huge swaggering riff and classic Morley lyric topped off with an unorthodox wailing guitar solo, while 'Chasing Shadows' similarly is all Led Zeppelin groove. On the more commercial side, 'The Thing I Want' is a lively romp with a chorus that isn't exactly amazing yet there's something that's just so damn infectious about it, 'When The Music Played' is classic, dramatic Thunder, while the ballad 'Broken' is stunning; the piano structure underpinning a wonderfully impassioned Bowes vocal.

It's where the album veers off into more atypical vectors that it becomes even more interesting. 'The Rain' is a gentle Folk ballad complete with Mandolin that's simple but stylish, while galloping along on an Iron Maiden style rhythm is 'The Prophet', possibly their darkest song to date. In complete contrast is 'Resurrection Day', its mid-tempo and awash with stunning melodies, 'Serpentine' is a sexy and slinky Muddy Waters Bluesy romp while 'I Love The Weekend' closes the album in a Faces-tinged, all-out Rock 'n' Roll style.

Thunder have done everything they needed to do with this album, the more unusual elements they have incorporated keeping everything fresh and exciting; it is all still very much classic Thunder but with a few added twists. As it is, it's probably the best thing they've done since 'Laughing On Judgment Day' all those years ago. 'Wonder Days' indeed.

Ant Heeks

vocalists but his performance could split opinion as he can sound a tad peculiar as on 'Touch The Sky' or decidedly rough as on 'Catching Fire'.

Such diversity on a record could undo many aspiring bands but Strangelet manage to make their disparate influences combine into a coherent whole. 'First Bite' might not draw blood but sinks its teeth in far enough to make you return to the disc and suggests this is a band off to a good start.

Duncan Jamieson

SUNLESS SKY – 'FIREBREATHER' *(Pure Steel)* HEAVY METAL

You have to admire a band that puts a fire breathing baby on their album cover, with the added touch of blood dripping from its mouth. This might give you an inkling that Cleveland band Sunless Sky do not do subtlety, and one listen of the album confirms that this is indeed the case.

'Firebreather' seems to the result of putting Iron Maiden, Judas Priest and Armoured Saint in a blender and giving what comes out a record deal. Although billed as Power Metal, this isn't anything like your Dragonforce or similar widdletastic bands, but more of a love letter to the mid-eighties, when men with long hair gathered in pubs and created formulaic Metal bands.

There's certainly talent on offer though and full marks go to vocalist Juan Ricardo for his controlled, high register singing that often sounds similar to Bruce Dickinson (it can't be a coincidence that they have a song called 'Air Raid'). The problem with the whole thing is that it's not at all exciting, with the same old riffs and solos that you have heard a million times before – it would be very easy to pass this off to friends as a thirty year old "lost classic".

I've nothing against bands that take inspiration from the good ol' days, but Sunless Sky just aren't that special as far as Retro Metal goes. They're good enough musicians, sure, but the album offers nothing new or innovative, instead rehashing a style that would have been hackneyed in 1985.

Alan Holloway

THE BOSSHOSS – 'GOD LOVES COWBOYS' *(Caroline)* SOUTHERN/COUNTRY/FOLK

Ten years in the saddle, this combination of "Elvis Presley and Johnny Cash at the apocalypse" (to use their words) have released a compilation of sorts (but they won't call it that) showing their remarkable music and some well appointed covers. To be honest, listening to this selection is a much better proposition than sitting down to a couple of albums full; the sixteen tracks here show just how much variety they have and it only occasionally bores.

They have that Country Noir feel of course, but there's a lot more going on here. It's not surprising that when forming in Berlin in 2004 they covered songs like 'Toxic' and Outkast's 'Hey Ya' in a Country style and then, as people caught on, started their own "thang". Tracks like 'Whatever' make they seem ineffably cool, horns blarting about, handclaps to the fore with riffs all dirty. 'God Loves Cowboys' has a boy band, lazy rap style which is better than it sounds, particularly with a sudden blast of horns and a Nu Metal 311 chorus. They repeat the refreshing oddness on the 1960's pastiche 'Shake & Shout' which relies on stabs of Hammond Organ and a wonderfully syncopated backline to Pop tasty bubblegum all over the place.

They can do Sleaze and faux Funk too ('My Way') and then there are those "bonus" covers, Countrification of Motorhead's 'Killers' and a successful hoe down on Cameo's 'Word Up', which was used in a Lynch advert a few years ago. Some of this ain't memorable, but that isn't the point, it's enjoyable. The double tracked vocals of Boss Burns and Hoss Power (ho and indeed ho) providing us with extra helpings and the music often confounding our expectations.

Much better in this 7"/single/version basis when the most successful pieces are corralled together, the Bosshoss nevertheless show that they have quality to spare and the ability to tickle you with their eclecticism, within the parameters that the Noir-ish Country sounds provide. It's interesting to hear what they can do; God may have blessed this cowboy but not totally – less Jesse James, more the Rumpo Kid.

Steve Swift

THE BULLHOUNDS – 'PROTECTOR' *(Independent)* ROCK

I well remember sitting in a pub a few years ago and being regaled by a florid man in a big hat who was in his cups about how his acting career wasn't successful because Derek Jacobi took all his parts. He was a pub bore; if the Bullhounds don't watch it, they could go that way too. Put together mainly from Georgia Satellites/Dan Baird & The Homemade Sin men, this definitely has a bar-room Boogie feel and a good time intention that will not quit, it's just that in the wee small hours we may look at each other and say "when's the full entertainment coming?"

"Perfectly acceptable" fits 'Fugitive' well, which has a whiskey-sipping feel and happy friends vibe and whilst 'Make It' has more to recommend it due to a simple attack, the general Rockabilly feel palls by the middle of the album, the hint of de rigueur Country style just adding to the curl of the lip. That the best thing here is closer 'Moments', an organic sounding ballad with dollops of organ and a lovely keening solo, speaking volumes.

The press release believes they touch the Black Crowes, Neil Young and The Rolling Stones with the energy of The Hives. If only we could have had such a thick soup; this is thin gruel by comparison. It is perfectly well done and will be fun to be with; it just doesn't give us anything to remember later in the day.

And we have high standards these days... Bullhounds firmly on a lead rather than running free.

Steve Swift

VARIOUS ARTISTS – 'ROCK 'N' ROLL REBELS & THE SUNSET STRIP: VOLUME 1' *(Eonian)* HARD ROCK

"We are all Sunset Strip certified bands, the unsung heroes of the greatest Rock scene that ever was. We are the last generation of Rock bands that ruled the L.A. music scene, we are the Hollywood underground. We are the Rock 'n' Roll Rebels Of The Sunset Strip!"

These are the words which open the thirteen page essay, 'Rock 'n' Roll Rebels, Sunset Strip Certified', in this superb four disc, thirty-six band, seventy-two song set which chronicles the "third wave" of outfits which graced the Rock 'n' Roll capital of the 1980s and early 1990s; Hollywood's Sunset Strip. Compiled by Stephen Craig of Eonian Records and JohnnyX who fronted two Strip regulars (The Wild and Johnny And The Jaguars), this is the aural and visual history of the bands who never got a chance, the bands whose music deserved more than to be shelved and forgotten in a sea of checked shirts and torn cardigans, the bands who believed that Rock should be fun, but not dumb. Each of the bands featured have contributed two songs, mainly demos, from their vaults, resulting in possibly the largest collection of Sunset Strip Rock ever assembled; it's one hell of a ride.

By this time, The Strip had already served up, amongst a whole host of others, Van Halen, Ratt and Mötley Crüe, before the likes of Guns 'N' Roses, L.A. Guns and Faster Pussycat proved The Strip really was the place to be if you loved quality Rock 'n' Roll. The conveyor belt didn't stop there though, Bang Tango, Lion, Great White and so on, all hitting the big time after triumphing on The Strip. The bands featured here were the new kids on the block, the bands ready, willing and as you'll hear, able to take up the mantle those legendary acts laid down. However circumstances didn't prove so kind; label politics and the media hunger for a "new scene" finding these talented, eclectic and hard-working bands discarded as yesterday's news, even before they had their day.

The variety on show is at first a shock, the long held belief that every Sunset Strip band was a Pretty Boy Floyd clone blown to smithereens. Don't get me wrong, if Party Rock is your thing, then you'll find plenty to get you going here and yet across the myriad of bands presented, you'll also discover a few offering up a Bluesy take on good time R&R and some darker edged tones more brooding than you'd imagine. Times were changing and amazingly the proof is here that The Strip bands realised and acted upon it before Seattle was known for more than Heart and Queensryche.

Obviously with the sheer volume of bands and songs contained on '...Sunset Strip', name-checking each and every one isn't possible, yet there's so much I can't ignore and that you'll definitely want to hear. Disc one kicks off with the superb 'Shootin' Daggers' from Rattlesnake Shake, the drama-filled intro immediately hooking your ear before a grinding, yet intricate riff hits the spot. The unusually named Alice Be Tokelas offer a darker edge on 'In The Morning', while The Wild take things in a Funky direction through the utterly irresistible 'Get Down 2 Night' and confident strut of 'Some Girls'. Long Gone will have you pulsating through a gyrating riff and punchy beat, 'Sticky Situation' offering up a sassy Aerosmith vibe while Bad Blood gleefully smash the dirtiness of GNR into the hip shaking of The Cult - and I haven't even mentioned the muscular Slaughter vibe from Cyclone Sound or the 1970's KISS of Hap Hazzard.

Disc two contains just as many goodies, the captivating Great White meets Led Zeppelin via Quiet Riot of 'Little Devils' superbly realised by Charlotte, while the swirling, twirling 'She's So Psychedelic' takes a Hair Metal gum-chewer and spits it out in a Punk fashion. Bad Bones offer up one of the few slower moments, 'My Love Is For Real' amazingly landing somewhere between Mötley Crüe and Zeppelin with Geddy Lee on vocals! While Scratch go for a more upbeat vibe as the marvellously titled 'Smack Dab' heads into Skid Row meets Da Crüe territory. The only all-gal group on show are Hardly Dangerous who bring a huge slice of Blues to their catchy good times; the vocals from Tomi Rae Brown are an impressive, if acquired, taste but when she goes for the throat, there's no doubting her skills. It's a fair bet Sam Mann And Thee Apes spent some time listening to Van Halen, marrying a Funkier edge to Mann's Dave Lee Roth-like vocals, although Mad Reign deliver a surprisingly Psychedelic-infused serving of ballsy riffs.

Impressively the standard doesn't dip, disc three showcasing Shake City who provide a perfect Arena sound through killer guitars and choruses which simply refuses to leave your mind. Heavier and more uncompromising are Blackboard Jungle, a beefed up Enuff Z'Nuff vibe in evidence, while 'Dogtown' from Taz finds an ultra-cool Halen riff slammed hard into a Funkier setting and sleazy vocals. That still leaves room for the attitude soaked and aggressive shimmy of Daddy Ray, the solo DL Roth razzle-dazzle of Children, the Poison with a boot up its ass of Shel Shoc and the band intrinsically linked to a certain Axl and Co., Hollywood Rose.

The final disc finds Deaf, Dumb And Blonde opening 'Heaven Tonight' as though it's 'Wanted Dead Or Alive' by Bon Jovi, but once the Bluesy riff kicks in, the personality of the band begins to really shine through, 'Down And Dirty' possessing a 'Doctor Feelgood' era Crüe vitality. Cold Shot (who Eonian have already released a full album by) impress with the energetic Slaughter-ish burst of 'Give Me What I Need', New Improved God adding a shot of Punk to a Hanoi Rocks Sleaze of Glam; although their 'Dead Rock Stars', which is a good song, is questionable in the way it handles the early death of some of music's prematurely lost talents. Agent Zero surprise with a darkly imagined take on Sleaze, Rough Justice add a serious grind of guitars that almost brings Metal into their catchy choruses, while Byte The Bullet inject a huge shot of urgency and passion into their fiery fare.

The work that has gone into this superb set really is plain to see, the booklet not only containing the aforementioned essay, but also some great pictures and a profile of each outfit detailing the background on the band, members, years they existed, song-writing influences and their musical style; basically it's a mini-encyclopaedia of the latter day Sunset Strip bands. Yes, there's no denying that some of the tracks sound like the demos they obviously are, yet that's easy to forgive when the otherwise unheard bands and songs are simply this good.

First and foremost this release deserves your attention because of the quality of the music it contains, but add in the packaging, detail and obvious passion that's gone into creating 'Rock 'N' Roll Rebels And The Sunset Strip' and I've no reservations in declaring it one of the essential releases of 2015.

Steven Reid

THE DREAMING – 'RISE AGAIN' *(Metropolis)* MODERN/ALTERNATIVE

The Dreaming is an American Modern Rock band founded in the Hollywood area in 2002 by former Stabbing Westward members Johnny Haro (drums) and Christopher Hall (lead vocals/guitar). 'Rise Again' follows 'Etched In Blood' from 2008 and 'Puppet' from 2011 and sees a return in style to that associated with SW in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The band line-up is completed by bass player Franccesca De Struct, guitarist Carlton Bost and finally Walter Flagus (keyboards/ programming who was another founder member of SW) who joined in 2014.

'Rise…' is something a little different in the Modern Rock genre as it features keyboards quite considerably during each song. Opener 'Alone' introduces a tribal drum beat before the riff comes crashing in, nestled within some influential Industrial textures. Hall's vocals are commanding and they soar in and out of the powerful and instant melody lines. 'Painkillers' has great energy and the sampled elements sit nicely alongside the guitars without being in any way intrusive. The main riff in 'Kisses Taste Like Death' batters the senses and soothes at the same time and drives the song through to the memorable hook. 'Empty Promises' follows suit with keyboards and guitars merging as one under the powerful rhythm section. 'Throw It Away' is the only track that has a ballad-like mood and song structure but the emotion it contains still has enough punch to keep it from being overly sentimental. Keyboards play a prominent part in shaping TD sound, almost like an AOR band playing Modern Rock (or vice versa), and the programmed enhancements that underpin each song simply embellish the great Rock vibe even further.

'Rise…' has great commercial appeal and if you have a penchant for anything in the Modern Rock vein then this album is something of a no brainer. Hall was responsible for choosing the album title and he wanted to deliver something that brought back the early SW sound and even though that name is now dead and buried, the founders of the band are pleased to 'Rise Again' as The Dreaming.

Dave Bott

THE GARY HARVEY BAND – 'GHOST DANCE' *(Independent)* ROCK

Even though the so-called "power trio" formula is a particularly demanding one in the world of music, the three-piece Gary Harvey Band is one of those who certainly rise up to the challenge – their sound being full and thick! And even if their homeland of New Zealand isn't necessarily the place you could have associated immediately with the juicy, feisty Blues Rock sound – Gary Harvey and his fellows are no newbies to the genre. What is more, they certainly form a good companion for a ride down the dusty American highway and that is exactly what their newly released album 'Ghost Dance' invites you to do.

There could have hardly been a better beginning to this album than 'Mr Healy', a tasteful mixture of 1960's Psychedelia and Free-tinted Blues Rock. 'It Ain't Pretty' is where the band strips their sound to its Texan Blues-infused roots, the journey down the smoke-filled joints somewhere off the beaten track being continued with 'Don't Lie To Me'. 'Ground Zero' is an atmospheric tale of Highway 61 illustrated with slow, darkling sound heavily embroidered with slide guitar playing; the multi-layered background vocals giving a slightly modern feel to it. 'Promised Land' draws much from the 1970's Blues Rock tradition again and the echoes of Free and perhaps even Cream are to be heard throughout the track. Boogie-soaked, Rootsy 'Nuthin' But The Blues' is perhaps the most aptly titled song on the album, followed by groovy, guitar-laden pieces 'Tired Of Thinkin' and 'Boss Mama'. The latter being the next-to-last song with the finale 'Kym Song' (dedicated to Harvey's late daughter) being a surprisingly mild finish, stripped down to only an acoustic guitar.

A well-judged selection of well-crafted songs and a multitude of vintage music inspirations – tinted with a distinctively Free-ish, Allman Brothers-ish and Lynyrd Skynyrd-ish hues – is what makes 'Ghost Dance' worth your attention. One couldn't really describe it as "radio-friendly", maybe with an exception of a track or two, and it's surely not an album to blast while partying heavily on Saturday night. Still, if there's a room for vintage-sounding Blues inside of your heart, you'll certainly agree there is something particularly captivating about the eclectic music mixture that The Gary Harvey Band plays. And this "something" is what makes you want to give it a spin over and over again.

Alexandra Mrozowska

THE STATIC SHIFT – 'WINDSOR STREET' *(Independent)* BLUES/SOUL

The Static Shift are 2014 winners of the Calgary Folk Music Festival, and have the honour of being sponsored by Yamaha Music Canada. The music in general is what I would term "college campus Rock" – inoffensive and generally forgettable background music.

That's not to say there is no good music on offer. 'Gates of Dawn' is a bouncy Rock tune, very much in the style of The Killers or Kasabian. 'Marguerite' has a slightly Southern flavour, and singer and guitar player Mitchell Brady has a distinctive voice that would lend itself well to any Country Rock song.

If you like a jig with your Rock then 'Needs And Greeds' will get you off your seat, though by the time we hit 'I Wont Do That', its easy to tire of the repetitive musical formula.

It's hard to determine if this is a group of musicians looking to make a career out of music, or just a bunch of friends wanting to knock out some Blues Rock for the fun of it.

Ray Paul

THE STORYTELLER – 'SACRED FIRE' *(Dark Legacy)* POWER METAL

As of late, Sweden has become quite the spawning ground for many a talented Melodic Rock band. However, the proverbial stork has delivered an equally impressive album that sits more in the Power Metal genre from a consortium of Swedes that call themselves The Storyteller.

With the exception of an extended break between 2005 and 2013, The Storyteller have been quite prolific, releasing an album every couple of years or so. 'Sacred Fire' is their sixth full-length studio album (and seventh release overall including an EP) since their self-titled debut back in 2000.

With its core ensemble of vocals, drums, bass and dual guitars, they also pay homage to the NWOBHM bands such as Iron Maiden. They deliver copious amounts of harmonized melody and lead guitars, galloping rhythmic figures and Progressive arrangements that often lands them in that classic, early to mid-1980's era sound that is, at times, comparable to Bruce Dickinson-fronted Maiden, albeit with a more Power Metal-like finish. Like the aforementioned, L-G Persson's vocals are wonderfully stout, yet are much closer to an amalgamation of Andi Deris (Helloween, Pink Cream 69) and Tobias Sammet (Edguy, Avantasia).

Amongst all of the fury, 'Ferryman' and 'Coming Home' are the tracks where the band slows the proceedings. In lieu of those double time rhythms, however, The Storyteller are able to concoct very anthemic, sing-along chorus' that will have an entire crowd chanting like brothers in arms with fists held high.

'Sacred Fire' pulls no cheap shots and delivers no-nonsense, modern day Power Metal from beginning to end with a dashing of NWOBHM here and there and is essential listening for fans of Edguy, Helloween (Deris-fronted) and Dragonforce.

The energy is relentless and although each song is capable of standing alone, the songs collectively function as a powerfully cohesive unit. As such, this is an album that is best enjoyed as a whole rather than in parts. Either way, you will not be disappointed.

Brent Rusche

THIRTEEN – 'A SHOT IN THE DARK' *(Freia)* PROGRESSIVE

The collaboration between composer/keyboardist Jeroen Van Der Wiel and vocalist Audrey Lahaije was the impetus for the formation of Thirteen and the end result is the band's debut album, 'A Shot In The Dark.'

It is primarily a laid-back affair, largely favoring extended length compositions that take on a much softer and mellower approach than other traditional Symphonic/Progressive Rock bands. Every song opens in a similar fashion, primarily building from a basic foundation of keyboard and vocal before growing into a full band affair. The ballads and atmospheres are too plentiful and too sparse are the harder elements leaving Thirteen bearing a closer resemblance to New Age artists like Yanni, Enya and Tori Amos than to the usual Symphonic/ Progressive Rock affairs that would be expected.

Although, 'I Don't Care' is the one track to feature a consistently heavy feel throughout, its impact is reduced with the delicate and forlorn vocal delivery. The album's apex is 'Arabian Nights'; it showcases a convincingly heartfelt, ethnic feel along with Thirteen's ability to juxtapose their penchant for melodrama as well as flex their Hard Rock muscle.

The album is bookended with a pair of ambitious nine minute plus tracks, the first of which is 'Desperation Of A Soldier'. Combined with its overall duration and taking more than five minutes to hit stride, it fails to develop quickly enough to keep the listener's attention. The album's closer, 'Deluded' also follows a similar fate, lacking a memorable chorus and any real sense of compositional direction.

With the right producer, many of these musical ideas could have very well been re-worked and forged into something more identifiable. If Thirteen are to be fully embraced by the Symphonic/Progressive Rock community, they will need to reinvent themselves on their next outing with songs that raise eyebrows and draw attention with memorable and more succinct songs.

Brent Rusche

THIS LEGEND – 'IT'S IN THE STREETS' *(Cyber Tracks)* MODERN/ALTERNATIVE

You want Poppy Punk? You want so much Poppy Punk that just hearing the phrase "Poppy Punk" will make you want to scream? Well...look no further true believer, as This Legend are as Pop Punk as it's possible to be; not so surprising when you learn that Longineu "LP" Parsons III and Ben Harper are involved, as both were founder members of Yellowcard.

'It's In The Streets' is packed chock-full of high energy, Pop Punk music with catchy choruses and hooks that young people will love bouncing around to, coupled with standard Pop Punk vocals and driving drum beats. So far so good, but the biggest problem with TL is that they don't sound like TL.

From opener 'Lyrics With My Pen' through to 'Josh Lights A Fire' ten tracks later, the album sounds like a carbon copy of Blink 182. If I didn't know better, I would have said that it was B182, and even though I do know better, I still have a nagging worry that the Blink boys are playing some sort of joke on me.

So, whilst This Legend are a perfectly acceptable Pop Punk band, they just happen to sound just like another perfectly acceptable Pop Punk band. If you like B182 (and everyone does, right?) then this will either delight or annoy you. I would say check out a track or two online and take it from there.

Me? I am going to carry on enjoying it for being an album full of great songs, but part of me will always be waiting for the big "ha-ha...fooled you all" announcement.

Alan Holloway

TIGER MOTH TALES - 'COCOON' *(Whiteknight)* PROGRESSIVE

This album is quintessentially the most English sounding I've heard in a long time. It's the brain child of Pete Jones who basically writes and plays everything on it and it's also probably one of the most interesting and challenging Prog albums I've had the pleasure of listening to. Jones states himself – "it all happened by accident really, one day I sat down to try and write a song, and ended up with the beginning of a Prog song about Trumpton" (an old U.K. children's show).

This happy accident led him to continue writing about his childhood and the TV shows/ books that he loved growing up. What then makes this album so English? Well, in parts, it's the odd and weird time signatures, the strange arrangements and subject matter that Jones uses. At first this will speak mostly to an English audience but given the time and breathing space it needs, it will surely draw everyone in to its absurd, surreal and quirky musical world.

The album is split into sections of beautifully played instrumental passages representing Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter, with the songs then interpreting what Jones, who has been blind since he was fifteen months old, was hearing on the TV as he grew up.

Take a listen to the eleven minute 'The Isle Of The Witches' to see where pure imagination can take you musically because what you hear isn't truly just a musical piece; it is instead a short play set to music. With Jones, in his best Shakespearian voice, narrating a story about the battles of witches and wizards to a backdrop of dark and, at times, menacing Prog Rock. It is so strange to the ears on the first few listens that you're not really sure what you're listening to. Stick with the song however and soon you'll warm to its delightfully twisted melodies and charismatic vocals, until you're soon convinced that you're in the presence of something that is truly individual.

Try 'The First Lament', an almost perfect eight minute instrumental piece, where the outstanding guitar work of Jones just has to be heard and enjoyed. Then to the track that started it all, the absolutely wonderful 'A Visit To Chigwick'. Some of you will remember watching the shows this song is based upon; Trumpton, Camberwick Green and Chigley and the stories of Windy Miller, Chippy Minton and the Fire Brigade. The nostalgia this song evokes is amazing and it brought back a lot of happy childhood memories.

UFO – 'A CONSPIRACY OF STARS' *(Steamhammer/SPV)* HARD ROCK

There can't be many reading Fireworks that don't know the history and legacy of UFO. Given some of their past "adventures", it's a near miracle that they're still a living, working band at all... never mind presenting us with the excellent 'A Conspiracy of Stars', the bands twenty-second studio album and surprisingly the first to be recorded in the U.K. for over twenty years. It's also the first to feature Rob de Luca (bass), having been part of the touring band since 2012.

'The Killing Kind' starts things off with a strong riff from Vinnie Moore, breaking into a Hard Rocking canter with Phil Mogg's typically intuitive, storytelling lyrics delivering a tale of love – a dark love of the killing kind. 'Ballad Of The Left Hand Gun' has a Bluesy introduction before launching into another monster riff and a lengthy solo from Moore. But as strong as the songs may be, it's the delivery and performances that lift the album above the norm. Surely Mogg has never sang better, his smooth, relaxed delivery switches to a powerful growl and you can feel the anguish in his voice when has asks "kiss away my pain" in 'Sugar Cane'

Moore too throws in some great solos with a sound and tone that after five albums and over ten years, has what has become a distinctive UFO feel. 'Devil's In The Detail' is another highlight; a mid-tempo romp, again with Mogg's vocals pushing it along in classic UFO style. De Luca has slotted in seamlessly even contributing to the writing of a couple of tracks and as ever, the contribution of Andy Parker and Paul Raymond shouldn't be under estimated. Raymond's keyboards provide the subtle melodies that underpin everything and allow Moore and Mogg to let rip with their power and passion; 'Precious Cargo' being a prime example.

Recorded at his own studio, Chris Tsangarides has done a superb job with the production; it's sharp, well balanced without ever sounding too clinical. Sure, certain song sections have a familiar feel to them and Mogg's phrasing of one or two lyrics seems reminiscent of past songs, but there's always enough quality to shine through. 'One And Only' and 'Rolling, Rolling' are another pair that stand out in bringing that blend of guitar and keyboards, muscle and melody together.

Whilst I don't think there's one stand out song, what UFO have produced is an album of a consistently high standard throughout. Mogg's vocals and lyrics excel, but this is a true band album where each member has made a significant contribution. This album looks and sounds like a throwback to the band's prime and in this form, it's definitely one not to miss.

Ian Parry

With 'Tiger Moth Tales', Pete Jones has made a must have for those who say they love Prog Rock; the album's warmness, weirdness, diversity, musicianship and Englishness make it not just quintessential... but essential.

Ian Johnson

TODD RUNDGREN – 'LIVE AT THE BBC 1972-1982' *(Esoteric)* PROGRESSIVE

Knowing that Todd Rundgren had been on the Old Grey Whistle Test for a long while, I thought this release was doomed never to happen. But here it is... a 3CD/1DVD box-set of Rundgren's recordings by the BBC.

In order; disc one covers the early ventures of Rundgren in the U.K. on the back of 'I Saw The Light' creeping into the U.K. Top 30. This is a low-key mono recording of Rundgren in 1972 on his own on piano or acoustic guitar with some backing tracks in front of an appreciative audience. Covering his earliest (and most enduring) songs, this is probably my favourite live set of Rundgren's ever; his voice is spot on throughout!

The second disc has similar-ish contents to Utopia's (Rundgren's band-based democratic alter-ego) 'Another Live' album which mixes Prog Rock instrumental excursions with West Side Story's 'Something's Coming'. A strange mix indeed from 1975 but of course anything Rundgren touches turns to gold. Of note, one of the backing singers is Luther Vandross who went onto great things before his untimely death in 2005.

The third audio disc contains Utopia in concert in 1977 with the classic line-up of Rundgren, Kasim Sulton, Roger Powell and John "Willie" Wilcox. Commercially near their peak, this contains many songs from the album 'Ra' including the epic 'Singring And The Glass Guitar' plus my favourite Rundgren song ever 'Love Of The Common Man' – take a leap from your ivory tower indeed.

The fourth item of the package, namely the DVD, is probably the main reason to get this box-set; it covers all Rundgren's Old Grey Whistle Test appearances, most notably the 1982 performance following his 'Hermit Of Mint Hollow' and 'Healing' albums. This was another purple patch for Rundgren as a singer/song-writer playing at the piano and he is shown in all his glory playing his hits such as 'Can We Still Be Friends' and the inevitable 'Hello It's Me'.

The DVD also includes the video to 'Time Heals' – the second video ever played on MTV after The Buggles' 'Video Killed The Radio Star'. Also of note, the DVD has clips of the legendary Utopia 'RA' tour with Rundgren and the gang wearing Ancient Egyptian costumes and playing in front of a pyramid which Rundgren famously flips down from later in the set.

This box-set is part of the 'Todd Rundgren Archive' series and is a worthy addition. A must for all Todd Rundgren fans; you know who you are.

Rob McKenzie

TRAGIK – 'PATH OF DESTRUCTION' *(Purley BMI)* HARD ROCK

Song-writer Phil Vincent is one of the busiest musicians there is, not only does he have a solo career, he also has several bands that he is part of running alongside it like Legion and of course Tragik. For most of these bands, he is also the principal song-writer so the fact he manages to keep the quality of his material so high is a real talent. I think these varying bands also allow him to show different sides to his writing; Tragik for example highlight a lighter, brighter Pop Rock vibe as opposed to the darkness and groove of Legion.

I'm a big fan of Vincent's output because he is so consistent at putting out enjoyable Melodic Rock albums, but because he is so prolific you are always waiting for that dud to rear its ugly head. Thankfully 'Path Of Destruction' isn't a dud, in fact it's far from it, I took to the album instantly and can quite categorically state that '...Destruction' is by far the strongest album Vincent has released, under the Tragik moniker at least.

I found that Vincent pushed himself vocally more on this record and there is a few moments where I reckon it's the best he has ever sung. This album could quite possibly contain my favourite Vincent song of all time in 'Reflections (Walk Away)'; a wonderfully upbeat, summer fuelled ballad with some great acoustic guitars that really intensify the "feel good" vibe and an unforgettable chorus. You still have those crunching guitars that are synonymous with Vincent's song-writing, but this album is really melody driven with lots of harmony drenched choruses; therefore the axe work still gives the songs some drive and punch, but never at the expense of those "feel good" melodies.

The album is essentially Melodic Hard Rock, but it has a real smoothness to it and there are a lot of slick choruses most notable on tracks like 'The Last To Know' and 'All The Time In The World'. Another strong influence that you get shining through is The Beatles and album closer 'Thank You' screams their influence. That said though, the sound and style (especially on the final three tracks) of the heavier guitar makes them more akin to Enuff Znuff than of course the straight Pop of The Beatles.

Vincent fans will love this album and enjoy adding it to their collection, but there's also plenty here for fans of solid Pop Rock and Melodic Hard Rock to enjoy. Given the album artwork also features a woman wielding a big sword and a dragon breathing fire, do you really need any other reason than that to buy this album... really, do you?

Paul Woodward

U.D.O. – 'DECADENT' *(AFM)* HEAVY METAL

Following hard on the heels of 2012's 'Steelhammer' which introduced us to new Russian guitarist Andrey Smirnov who played all of the guitars, and a world tour where they added second guitarist Kasperi Heikkinen (Amberian Dawn), we now have the fifteenth and latest pounding Heavy Metal studio release from U.D.O.

It's difficult to call them Teutonic Terrorizers because only Udo Dirkscheider and bass player Fitty Weinhold are German these days. It's very much an International set-up with Russian Smirnov, Finn Heikkinen and Italian drummer Francesco Jovino (although Jovino has since left for personal reasons before its official release).

What I find with this album is an awful lot of anger and general disgust with society and the world that is evident in Dirkschneider's and Weinhold's lyrics. Coupled with the break-up of Dirkschneider's twenty-six year marriage, it's no wonder there's little light amongst the dark on this album.

Suitably heavy, dark and visceral, none more so than the title track 'Decadent' with its crunching incessant riffing and squealing Metal solos that has a disturbing and thought provoking video to accompany the lyrics of disgust at individuals excesses and irrelevance towards others – "is that a child I see, arms outstretched to me, what do I care if it dies, it means nothing to me".

'House Of Fake' with its strong riffing and blazing twin solos offers their disdain at corrupt Governments, the mid-tempo 'Pain' with its railing against the society –"I give my finger to the system, I give my finger to it all, I don't care about the reason, I don't want it anymore" – and the ballad 'Secrets In Paradise' which talks about his ex-wife (and incidentally has an exquisite solo) all have a dark undercurrent.

There are, of course, typical U.D.O. fodder in the likes of 'Meaning Of Life', 'Breathless' and opening number 'Speeder' that are all mid-tempo, heavy and aggressive with wonderful melodic solos from both Smirnov and Heikkinen to add colour to the Metallised brutality. Weinhold and Jovino are tremendous musicians that nail the solid rhythms and deliver all the required heavy blasts and bombast, never more so than on the excellent head-banging anthem 'Untouchable'.

The Speed Metal power of 'Under Your Skin' also offers another terrific example of what U.D.O. can deliver to Metal fans in 2015 and 'Mystery' is another dark song with brutal lyrics from Dirkschneider's psyche delivered in an almost menacing, snarling Dave Mustaine kind of fashion.

The riff heavy, epic anthem 'Words In Flame' with its orchestral overlay takes us out on a stirring melodic guitar tone finish and one is left with a sense that this album ticks all the right boxes for a bona fide Metal fan. For U.D.O. – mission accomplished!

Carl Buxton

ULI JOHN ROTH – 'SCORPIONS REVISTITED' *(UDR)* HARD ROCK

Besides Herman Rarebell ('Herman's Scorpion's Songs') and the Scorpions themselves ('Return To Forever') which are both reviewed elsewhere in this issue, guitar legend and former Scorpions member Uli John Roth has also decided to present us with another Scorpions related item and another blast from the past. Looking back on his early days with the legendary Hard Rock band from Hanover, Germany, Roth found himself absolutely intrigued to re-interpret, re-invent and re-record some of his favourite Scorpions songs.

'Scorpions Revistited' is released as a double album and contains nineteen songs which all sound familiar to us – of course. But Roth has kind of breathed new life into these classical masterpieces by re-imagining them with his outstanding, innovative and powerful guitar skills. To call these nineteen selected tracks mere re-recordings would be inappropriate on all fronts. Especially noteworthy are the highly emotional 'Life's Like A River', the Bluesy, pounding and guitar-focused 'Dark Lady', the classical 'Virgin Killer' and the slightly Progressive and equally classical 'Fly To The Rainbow' all of which are unbelievable crackers and my personal favourites from the album – although in truth I have to admit that picking favourites is pretty impossible on this record since all these songs deserve attention and utter respect.

"The material for this CD was recorded last year in the same hall in Hanover that we used for the Scorpions rehearsals from 1973 to 1978" states Roth. "Together with an amazing bunch of very talented young musicians, I revisited my personal favorites from the early Scorpions period, some of which were written in that same hall".

The "amazing bunch of very talented young musicians" are none other than vocal phenomenon Nathan James, Roth's old companion Ule W. Ritgen (bass) along with Niklas Turmann (guitar, vocals), Corvin Bahn (keyboards, vocals) and David Klosinski (guitar).

"It was an emotional few days, and I am very pleased with the results in more ways than one. The idea was to stay truthful to the original spirit of the music, while also putting a new slant on it whenever it felt like the right thing to do. I feel we really succeeded in this and I'm very excited about this project. It was a intense journey into the past and I think

we really managed to bring the songs back to life with a vengeance."

When he's right, he's right. His revistitation neither comes up with a fusty sound nor does it have that certain "heard-it-all-before" character. The songs were revolutionized with the possibilities of modern recording and mixing. Roth takes us on a very emotional journey to his past, during which we find ouselves carried away on a wave of creativity, ingenuity and a fresh breeze of modern sounds. Furthermore we can happily look forward to another announcement in 2015 but until then, we should just enjoy Uli Jon Roth's impressive return to the early days of his musical career with all our senses.

Julia Braun

URIAH HEEP – 'LIVE AT KOKO, LONDON 2014' *(Frontiers)* ROCK

Although arguably a "greatest hits" of sorts, Uriah Heep's new live album 'Live At Koko, London 2014' should not be considered a collector's only item for the first generation of fans who praise their earliest Byron-Hensley era output. On this 2CD/1DVD live release, the band presents a cross-section of their material from their 1970 debut ('Gypsy') to their most recent album 'Outsider' ('One Minute', 'Can't Take That Away'). And it's not only this diversity that differentiates UH from many of their veteran peers, eager to base their gigs on a well-tried, tested and accepted set of vintage staples with the odd couple of new songs sandwiched between the oldies. Also, unlike many of them, this band sounds equally tight and focused – and equally convincing – in whatever the group selects, from its earliest offerings to their latest selections. And it's the handful of Hammond and guitar adornments omnipresent in the band's sound song after song that builds a bridge between the classic and the contemporary.

Several concerts on this particular tour were opened with 'Against The Odds' from Heep's 1995 'Sea Of Light' album and the London gig at Koko was no different. Embroidered with a heavy riff and a trademark chorus, it's followed by another punchy 1970's-tinted staple of the band's latter repertoire – 2008's 'Overload'. The band soon reaches back to their early period with the feisty 'Traveller In Time', followed by further classics in 'Sunrise' and 'Stealin'. This nostalgia trip ends when 'I'm Ready' from 2011 'Into The Wild' begins. However this choice, as well as Hammond-laden 'Between Two Worlds' and 'Nail On The Head', prove the Shaw-era repertoire is no weaker than that of his predecessors. And what's more, the two following tracks off of 'Outsider' match the rest of the set equally well – especially 'One Minute' with its piano-based, majestic opening that smoothly morphs into a full-blown Rocker. 'Into The Wild' is no slowdown either and yet another convincing performance from the night at Koko. Then, within the few first seconds of the heavy, lumbering intro to 'Gypsy', you know the truly "classic" part of the set has arrived. A furious rendition of 'Look At Yourself' turns into a drum solo, followed by Mick Box's blistering guitar showcase entitled 'Box Wah Box'. As would be expected, the very best is saved until the end; the audience's particularly enthusiastic roar precedes a fantastic performance of the group's arguable anthem 'July Morning' that is followed by the crowd sing-along 'Lady In Black'. The concert's grand finale consists of the Progressive flavours of 'Free 'N' Easy' and the mad-tempo of 'Easy Livin" which brings the show and the album/DVD to its conclusion.

If you don't take into consideration the 'Official Bootleg Series' albums released by earMusic, this is technically the first Uriah Heep live album since 2011's 'Live In Armenia'. Comparing the two, some may complain that the track lists of both are pretty similar, with the exception of a few selections – these, however, are just minor faults as '...Koko 2014' is a very good live release from a legendary band. It blends the classic vibe of '... Morning' or 'Gypsy' with the handful of newly created sounds from their more recent studio endeavours; it illustrates it all with colourful video footage of the gig on the DVD.

'Uriah Heep – Live At Koko 2014' is a good example of Box and his gang offering a tangible, vivid experience of what the band is on the live stage, especially for those who weren't lucky to see the legendary British Rockers on this most recent 2014 tour.

Alexandra Mrozowska

VARIOUS ARTISTS – 'ELEMENTS OF FRICTIONS' *(Lions Pride)* MELODIC ROCK

I'm rather indifferent when it comes to compilation albums. However, once in a while one emerges that ticks the majority of boxes; song choice, artists and value for money. 'Elements Of Frictions' (not to be mistaken with the 2001 MTM release featuring Robin McAuley and Tommy Aldridge) is a compendium of artists past and present (known and not so known) offering an AOR/Melodic Rock buffet that should entice you back for multiple helpings. It's the inaugural album from Lions Pride, a brand new label based in Denmark, and the brainchild of Carsten Nielsen whose passion is unquestionable, but understandably tinged with caution as he tentatively looks to recruit for future projects/ releases. With fourteen tracks on the album, I'm afraid my wordage does not allow me to mention and elaborate on every song, so a little research on your part would be beneficial to all.

'Elements....' commences strongly with a long-awaited offering from Marcello/ Vestry (remember them?); 'When You Grow Up' is impressive and upholds the quality of their highly acclaimed 2008 debut – rumour has it that their second album is nearing completion and if this is anything to go by, it'll be gobsmackingly good! Matti Alfonzetti (Jagged Edge, Bam Bam Boys) takes the lions share (pardon the pun) of early contributions; 'Love Don't Live Here Anymore', performed by Swedish Rock fledgling Emma Varg (and written by Alfonzetti) is not dissimilar to recent releases by Robin Beck, Angelica, Issa et al, and is sandwiched between Area 51's 'Little One' and Alfonzetti's own 'Don't Leave Me Lonely' which has a distinctive BBB vibe to it. The core of the album develops a sea change in tempo as it moves into Melodic Rock territory. Alfonzetti's writing prowess is still evident though; 'Make You Mine' features a welcomed return for Larry Baud (Red Dawn), who delivers with style and Oliver Fehr's (Transit) 'Don't Walk Away' is a heavy, yet melodic affair and possibly my album favourite. The final third is probably the album's Achilles heel despite some diverse, yet enjoyable songs; 'To The Limit' by Pete Loran (Trixter) is a catchy, up-tempo Pop Rock affair and Paul Laine's (Danger Danger, Shugaazer, Dark Horse) 'Another Me' is comparable to Marvelous 3's style. The heaviest song is without question 'Somebody Up There', surprisingly delivered by the luscious voice of Tommy La Verdi (21 Guns, LRS). Sadly however, the final three songs by Stephan Kammerer (Frontline), Rich Cox (Sic Vikki) and Mark Evans (Heaven's Edge) are rather bland in comparison.

Sequencing issues aside (just shuffle), this is a great album for parties and road trips and a commendable start for Lions Pride Music. I'm sure we all wish Mr Nielsen good luck with his future endeavours.

Dave Crompton

VEXILLUM - 'UNUM' *(Limb)* POWER METAL

Italian Battle/Folk Metallers Vexillum have returned with their third album, the oddly titled 'Unum'. 'Unum' is a concept album that sees the main protagonist (played by the band's vocalist Dario Vallesi) going on a quest where he's aided by a cast of strange characters. As he travels these characters, played by a who's who of European Metal vocalists including Chris Bay (Freedom Call), Hansi Kursch (Blind Guardian), Maxi Nil (Jaded Star/ex-Visions of Atlantis) and Mark Boals (Malmsteen, Iron Mask, Ring of Fire), all help him out and contribute to the overall story. As you would be expected each of these vocalists, who play The Jester, The Sentenced, a Lady Thief and a Hermit respectively, put in a wonderful performance.

So what is to be expected from this bunch of Italian lunatics? 'Unum' is a forceful album full of chant-along Folk Metal songs that use everything from guitars to bagpipes to get the story of the album across and in my opinion it's by far their best release to date. The song-writing is the tightest yet, the arrangements are more involved and powerful than before and the whole band perform out of their battle kilts (yes they do wear them) during these songs and album.

'The Departure: Blow Away The Ashes', 'The Jester: Over The Clouds', 'The Sentenced: Fire And Blood' all thunder past as the album begins, but as I listened to 'Unum' I realised and noticed that the usual galloping, double kick drum songs of old have been replaced by more well-thought out and mid-paced fare that shows a new maturity in the band's song-writing. 'Lady Thief: What We Are' is a wonderful duet featuring Vallesi and Nil whose vocals are complemented by some wonderful Uilleann pipes that fit so well with Vexillum's music. The latter half of the album features more great tracks like 'The Hermit: Through The Mirror', 'The True Beginning: Standing As One' and 'Spunta La Luna Dal Monte' which all prove that Vexillum have come up with a really strong album. Finishing with a fun cover of Slade's 'Run Runaway' is a stroke of genius as the band's Folk Metal take on the song really suits it to a tee.

Vexillum, with 'Unum', have just leapfrogged over many other such acts who play this type of fast-paced Folk Metal and that's because their music is not only very good but also a hell of a lot of fun as well.

Ian Johnson

VICTORIUS – 'DREAMCHASER' *(Sonic Attack)* POWER METAL

Now this is what we want! These German Power Metal maestros have delivered a third album that takes all the positives from the first two and builds on them with even more mighty Metal mayhem. Taking the baton from the likes of DragonForce and Freedom Call, 'Dreamchaser' is the ideal record to be released on a label called 'Sonic Attack'.

It's impossible to listen to Victorius without thinking of DragonForce, because when they build up a head of speed, they are every bit as good as the Power Metal princes. Straight out of the gate, 'Twilight Skies' barrels along with gusto and vigour, drums going like the clappers, guitars widdling like an incontinent Labrador and vocals soaring to the sky and back. Yes, I quite like it.

It doesn't stop until the majestic closing ballad 'Silent Symphony', which is the kind of ballad I actually like – one with big brass balls. Elsewhere, the standout track for me

WOLFPAKK – 'RISE OF THE ANIMAL' *(AFM)* HARD ROCK

'Rise Of The Animal' is the third in a series of all-star projects put together by Michael Voss (Mad Max, Silver, amongst others) and Mark Sweeney (probably best known for his time with Swiss Melodic Rockers Crystal Ball). As with the previous two releases, as well as writing all the tunes, the pair contribute vocals and guitar, alongside a multitude of guests resulting in a rich and varied album that swings seamlessly from straight forward Hard Rock to frantic Power Metal riffing. And I must confess that when I first read through the bio and line-up of contributors, I was just a little concerned how coherent and consistent the album as a whole could be.

Fortunately those concerns are totally blown away by the sheer quality of what is on offer here. Voss and Sweeney have built their reputations over the years on a combination of power and melody and that's evident right from the opening track of 'Rider Of The Storm'. Helloween's Andi Deris' rough vocal spit out the verse over the racing drums of a Power Metal riff, with Sweeney and Voss's smoother voices sharing the chorus lines. All this is then topped off with a melodic, but pacey lead break from Night Ranger's Jeff Watson. 'Sock It To Me' is classic anthemic Rock with Sweeney and Voss again sharing vocal duties with Marc Storace of Krokus.

Highlights include 'Highlands' giving us the seemingly bizarre combination of German and Swiss, American vocalist Joe Lynn Turner (Rainbow, Deep Purple) and Irish guitarist Bernie Torme (Gillian) in a historical tale of the Scottish/ English civil wars of 'Braveheart' times. 'Rise Of The Animal' itself is another soaring Power Metal classic with the vocals of Sweeney and Voss intertwining with Michael Kiske (Helloween, Unisonic) perfectly.

Elsewhere there are contributions from Don Dokken, Charlie Huhn (Ted Nugent, Gary Moore) and Ted Poley (Danger Danger) amongst others as well as guitar work from John Norum (Europe), Doug Aldrich (Whitesnake) as well as Voss himself. Thrown in some drums from Chris Slade (AC/DC, MSG) and Simon Phillips (Toto) along with Magnum's Al Barrow and Bob Daisley (Rainbow, Black Sabbath, Ozzy Osbourne) and you start to get the picture; it is a list that is by no means exhaustive.

But what's most impressive about this album is the fact that Voss and Sweeney as producers have managed to pull it all together so seamlessly. Vocal tones compliment within the structure of verse and chorus and despite the varied guitar contributions and Rock/Metal styles on display, they really do manage to maintain that coherency within a band/project theme. So much so I just might be checking out the two previous Wolfpakk releases.

Ian Parry

is 'Speedracer', a three and a half minute showcase of speed and pure melody that is simply an astounding example of Melodic Speed Metal.

Ultimately, Victorius aren't bringing anything new to the genre but what they have is so tight, so entertaining that they are easily forgiven. Passionate, fast, powerful and full of lovely guitar work, 'Dreamchaser' will please any fans of Melodic Power Metal with ease.

Alan Holloway

VISIGOTH – 'THE REVENANT KING' *(Metal Blade)* HEAVY METAL

Salt Lake City is seen as a Mormon City; the book is worshipped. And that can bring about a Marlon moment, the "what are you rebelling against... what have you got?" taunt. Visigoth are from Salt Lake City and have thrown in their lot with the true Metal hordes, the Iron Brotherhood as they would have it; a turning against the idolatry in front of them.

And yet... and yet... is this not a slavish adherence to a Metal sound of yore? Yes, unfortunately it is. And that sound is Maiden of an Iron variety. The opening title track doesn't get off the launch pad and we have eight minutes of meaty scrag end riffing and uber dramatic vocals. The solo is a bit timid too, which is sadly a six string feature here.

At least 'Dungeon Master' shows some contained energy, could even be said to be NWOBHM, could certainly be said to have a Proggy section much loved by Happy Harry and the boys. 'Blood Sacrifice' even makes a break for your attention, with more about it, some light and shade and a doubled widdler of a solo which actually tries to outdo itself.

Generally though, this is a bit lumpen as 'Iron Brotherhood' gives away any excitement it might have created and although closer 'From The Arcane Mists Of Prophecy' throws a lot in, slowing to a crawl, peddling some vaguely Celtic sounds, banging away valiantly, it isn't worth the ten minute running time.

Better when they take a simple idea and just do that, this is nothing here that we haven't heard before and lots of stuff we might wonder why we are hearing again. The Visigoths were Nomadic tribes who cut a swathe through Europe; these Visigoths need a new battle plan.

Steve Swift

WAKE THE NATIONS – 'SIGN OF HEART' *(Inverse)* AOR

A new AOR outfit from Finland has come bouncing out of the shadows full of 1980's-inspired fluffery; big parping keyboards with melodic rhythm guitar and bass lines are the order of the day. The band's main song-writer and guitarist Risto Tuominen was in the cult AOR act Human Temple as was bass player Janne Granfors and keyboard player Jori Tojander, so it won't come as a surprise that stylistically it's similar to that band but with less of a Hard Rocking edge and more of a straightforward AOR sound.

Tojander's keys have a stronger up-front role that makes comparisons to fellow Finns Brother Firetribe not wildly farfetched (at times). They are also reminiscent of Swedish AOR stars Miss Behaviour with their fondness for weaving keyboard and guitar hooks together.

What separates Wake The Nations from HT are the vocals. Here the band have elected to rope in a number of singers to front the songs in the kind of manner Frederic Slamer does with his AOR project, albeit with lesser known names.

Janne Hurme, the singer of HT, sings on two tracks compounding the comparisons to that band. When Krister Stenbom takes to the mic, WTN effectively become Villa Sucks which all of the musicians in this band previously played in; Stenbom's 'So Broken' happens to be one of the best songs. There are also a couple of female singers in Taage Laiho and Etef Martinez who bring a Quarterflash or Osukaru vibe to the songs.

Tuominen's solos are tastefully understated and his songs do have some good old-school hooks in places. However, in a crowded market place at the moment this album would have benefitted from a stronger overall production sound and the use of so many singers, while offering a varied and interesting listen, does dilute who Wake The Nations really are as a band. Also, while some of the singing performances are good, others are patchy and opting for just one or maybe two lead singers to make it feel more like a band album rather than a compilation would work better in future.

Not at the top of the shopping list when there are so many great releases available at the moment but definitely worth picking up if you happen to be a fan of independent European AOR.

Duncan Jamieson

WHYZDOM – 'SYMPHONY FOR A HOPELESS GOD' *(Scarlet)* SYMPHONIC METAL

Along with Trans-Siberian Orchestra, Whyzdom is another genuine "Cirque Du Soleil" of Metal. This Female-Fronted sextet from France is able to create dense arrangements that ooze drama, passion and excitement. As the title suggests, 'Symphony For A Hopeless God' is epic in every aspect, grabbing hold of the listener and taking them on a journey through the collective thoughts, minds and emotions of Whyzdom.

Marie Rouyer delivers a vocal performance that exudes class and confidence which effortlessly soars over the bombastic drumming of Nico Chaumeaux and the heavy, dual-guitar riffing of Vynce Leff and Regis Morin. The keyboards (Marc Ruhlmann) play a significant role in fleshing out the arrangements without ever dominating the composition. The production only helps to elevate the music, affording the listener the ability to find something new on each subsequent play.

The combination of male guttural and female melodic vocal styles works very well, never better realized than on 'While The Witches Burn.' Notwithstanding the fact that this album is an epitome of the style standing alongside (if not above) many of its peers, the tracks 'Let's Play With Fire' and 'Where Are The Angels' are unquestionable highlights. This album comes highly recommended for those both new and well versed in Symphonic Metal.

Along with Within Temptation, Whyzdom is clearly another trendsetter in the genre with the release of 'Symphony For A Hopeless God'. With their ability to continue to up the ante with each subsequent release, Whyzdom certainly have some tough shoes to fill when it comes time to start work on their next release. However, history has already proven that they will be up for the challenge and fans should not only embrace this latest act of brilliance, they should also eagerly anticipate future material from this captivating ensemble.

Brent Rusche

WIND ROSE – 'WARDENS OF THE WEST WIND' *(Scarlet)* HEAVY METAL

It's always a little daunting when you get an album in the first week of the year that some people are already touting as a possible Album Of The Year. Yoinks – not much pressure to like it then! Italy's Wind Rose have certainly made plenty of friends with this, their second album, and although I'm not likely to be on their Christmas card list come the end of the year, I can see why people are bouncing up and down with excitement, even if I'm not.

'Wardens Of The West Wind' is a little like a musical version of all the bloodiest shows on the History Channel, except all the ones about Hitler. It's all chest-beating tales of glory and battle from Vikings to Pirates to Romans and full of atmosphere and bursts of Folk energy to tame the sort of Metal that Manowar would nod approvingly at whilst flexing their muscles.

Yes, this is a heavy album, more Traditional Metal than Symphonic, although with a sharp intelligence and sense of planning that is not apparent to those who just hear big riffs and ignore subtlety. I have to admit I'm not sold on the vocals of Francesco Cavalieri too much, as he's a little too shouty at times for my taste and this robs him of any real identity. He does the job, though, and won't frighten anyone off.

Wind Rose are obviously doing something right, and lovers of Folk/Battle/Power Metal, injected with a bit of Prog and storytelling, will have a ball here. Ultimately though, I found it hard to get as excited as some reviewers have, although I have no reservations in recommending this to anyone who's into this sort of Epic Metal.

Alan Holloway

YES – 'LIKE IT IS: YES AT THE BRISTOL HIPPODROME' *(Frontiers)* PROGRESSIVE

For Yes devotees like me, this 2CD/DVD package is a welcome addition to my collection. However, considering this is the third Yes album release within six months (the others being latest studio album 'Heaven And Earth' and the 'Tsongas' live album from the 35th Anniversary tour of 2004) overkill does come to mind.

A major criticism of this release is the fact that the 2013/2014 tour promoted three classic albums being played in their entirety (and in sequential order). Unfortunately, 1972's 'Close To The Edge' album has been totally omitted as has the encore 'Roundabout'. I was lucky enough to catch a couple of those shows last spring and would have liked this to have been the "full" souvenir of the show. Anyhow, moan over, what do we get in this package?

The first disc contains the 1977 'Going For The One' album, so we get a run through the title track with Steve Howe on steel guitar and latest vocalist Jon Davison doing a fine job of recreating the magic of Jon Anderson's lyrics. 'Turn Of The Century' begins lightly with Howe's acoustic guitar and Geoff Downes tinkling the ivory keys (he's not Rick Wakeman though). Chris Squire adds backing vocals and some fine bass and then Howe switches to some magical lead guitar. Personal favourite 'Parallels' raises the tempo a notch and Howe and Squire both show why they're still held in such high regard with some fine musicianship. Davison takes up acoustic guitar on 'Wonderous Stories' and adds extra keyboards during the mid-section of 'Awaken' whilst Squire treats us to his triple neck bass.

Disc two contains 1971's 'The Yes Album' and features classics like 'Yours Is No Disgrace', Howe's signature acoustic tune 'Clap' and 'Starship Trooper', all performed to the high standards that fans have become accustomed to, especially the backing vocals from Howe and Squire on 'Yours Is No Disgrace'. 'I've Seen All Good People' again features some wonderful harmonies from Squire and Howe while Davison adds his own stamp to the song. Thirty-three years on, 'A Venture' is finally performed live on this tour and Downes adds a little keyboard solo in the middle to celebrate its outing. 'Perpetual Change' brings things to a rousing close.

Visually, I think it's fair to say that the accompanying DVD certainly lacks some atmosphere, the crowd are very restrained throughout and as a result at certain points it is quite obvious that faded-in applause has been added. Some of the camera cues are noticeably off (the cameramen couldn't have been fans). Drummer Alan White only comes to life during 'All Good People' and Squire is much more restrained in his movement. Considering that Roger Dean was involved, the stage set is rather bland. Overall though, this is a fine representation of two of Yes' strongest albums.

Az Chaudhry

COMPETITION

Fireworks Magazine has THREE PAIRS of tickets for this year's Vasby Rock Festival to give away! The Festival features appearences from the likes of W.A.S.P., Danger Danger, Michael Schenker, Magnum, Rated X, H.e.a.t and many more. If you want to win a pair of the tickets, all you have to do is answer this simple question:

Which Swedish band headlined Vasby last year?

Send your answers on postcard to this address:

Fireworks Magazine - Vasby Competition
10 Dunnock Close
Offerton, Stockport
SK2 5XD
UK

Good luck!

RE-ISSUES

DIXIE DREGS – 'DREGS OF THE EARTH'/ 'UNSUNG HEROES'/'INDUSTRY STANDARD' *(BGO)* ROCK

Best known for having their 1977 track 'Take It Off The Top' used as the theme tune for Tommy Vance's Friday Rock Show, and a line-up that included current Deep Purple guitarist Steve Morse and Winger drummer Rod Morgenstein, Georgia's Dixie Dregs were certainly a band of amazing musicians with their own unique sound. With an almost exclusively instrumental mix of Hard Rock, Jazz, Country and Progressive Rock, they released eight studio albums between 1976 and 1994, this two-disc re-issue covering albums five, six and seven, recorded between 1980 and 1982.

Having established their reputation as musicians and writers through the iconic 'Free Fall' and 'What If' albums, many found 1979's 'Night Of The Living Dregs' a bit disappointing, but thankfully they were back on track with 'Dregs Of The Earth'. Eight mostly accessible tunes include the typical Morse melodies of the upbeat Rocker 'Road Expense', the slow Boogie of 'Twiggs Approved' and 'Broad Street Strut's Jazzy grooves, alongside offbeat selections like the lively Country hoedown of 'Pride O' The Farm' and the beautiful 'Old World', a simpler vehicle for Allen Sloan's emotive violin and Morse's acoustic guitar. Pick of the bunch is the quirky 'I'm Freaking Out', a Zappa-like Jazz Rocker based around the brilliant keyboard work of T. Lavitz and Andy West's inventive bass. It's also perhaps ironic that 'Hereafter' has a melodic arrangement not dissimilar to Kansas.

By 1981 they'd dropped the 'Dixie' part of the name and were going out simply as The Dregs, kicking off the 'Unsung Heroes' record with a new, shorter and sharper version of their Jeff Beck-influenced 'Cruise Control', on which the alternate solos between Morse, Lavitz and Sloan are a joy to behold. Other highlights include West's fret-less bass on the slowly building 'Day 444', the upbeat Boogie workout 'Rock & Roll Park', Sloan's violin work on 'Attila The Hun' and the stunning 'Kat Food', which is light-hearted, Funky and instrumentally dazzling. Their humour also comes through on the mellow closer 'Go For Baroque'

It's never been fully documented if the slight diversion in style for 1982's 'Industry Standard' was their own idea or that of the record company. Either way there were two vocal tracks to try to get more airplay, guest singer Patrick Simmons of The Doobie Brothers lending his amazing tone to the straight-ahead Blues Rocker 'Ridin' High', whilst Santana's legendary Alex Ligertwood does a similar job on the great driving Rocker 'Crank It Up', sounding for all the world like Steve Walsh and pre-dating the style and direction that Walsh and Morse would take Kansas in for the 'Power' record the following year. The rest is in more familiar territory, albeit with a thicker production and grittier guitar sound from Morse. New violinist Mark O'Connor makes his presence felt on 'Assembly Line' and the Country strains of both 'Chips Ahoy' and the amusingly titled 'Where's Dixie?', whilst there's a big riff running through 'Bloodsucking Leeches' and the whole band get a chance to shine during the sublime 'Vitamin Q'. '...Standard', as good as it is, was a last gasp attempt at major acceptance and one that resulted in the band going their separate ways for over a decade, until the reunited for the autobiographical 'Full Circle' in 1994.

The re-mastering of these albums is excellent, although for me, it's tempered by already owning the stunning Japanese SHM-CD re-issues of a few years ago, and whilst I'm not a fan of spreading three albums out over two discs, at least none of the individual albums are split like others in the BGO catalogue (two full albums on disc one, the third on disc two!). This value-for-money package provides a chance for European fans to delve into this classic U.S. band.

Phil Ashcroft

EXTREME – 'PORNOGRAFFITTI' *(UMC)* HARD ROCK

One of the biggest selling Rock albums of 1990, 'Pornograffitti' was the sophomore offering from the Boston band who brought us a new era of Rock/Funk/shred and a whole lot of attitude.

Nuno Bettencourt (guitars), Gary Cherone (vocals), Pat Badger (bass) and Paul Geary (drums) paved the way for the next generation of Melodic and quirky Rock with their infectious tunes and energy-filled live shows. Spawning the classic singles 'More Than Words' and 'Get The Funk Out', I have to admit, I always preferred 'It's A Monster', 'He-Man Woman Hater' and 'Hole Hearted' to these big selling singles if I am honest.

Now, to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the initial release, Universal have brought out this 'Deluxe Edition' featuring the album plus an added disc of extras, although four other versions of '...Words' and two more versions of '...Out' do seem a little redundant/excessive/overkill (delete as appropriate) to me. But there are a couple of b-sides; 'Nice Place To Visit' and 'Sex N' Love' which are definitely worth the cost of this release alone.

Still, there's no denying that these are some of the catchiest, energetic and most brilliantly executed songs ever recorded and I challenge anyone not to be dancing or at least singing along whilst listening. For the completists amongst you, this is a must have.

Basically, if you're a fan – buy it. If you're not a fan – you must be dead inside!

Sue Ashcroft

GALAHAD – 'EMPIRES NEVER LAST: DELUXE' *(Galahad/Avalon)* PROGRESSIVE

The role of a reviewer is to approach an album objectively and give an unbiased opinion on what they hear… oh bugger it, I love 'Empires Never Last', always have, always will. It's the album which introduced me to Galahad and one I go back to on an extremely regular basis. Arguably the two studio efforts which followed, 'Battle Scars' and 'Beyond The Realms Of Euphoria', are more rounded and possessing of a broader outlook and yet, 'Empires…' is still my main Galahad of choice.

Eight years down the line and the low rumble which offers up a beautiful female vocal (both Sarah Bolter and Tina Booth contribute to the album) still raises expectations and anticipation as the poignant piece wends its way towards front-man Stuart Nicholson's album shaping cry of "DE-FI-ANCE". From here the ride begins in earnest; church organ slamming into gurgling riffage as we race headlong into 'Termination'. The whole album, as Galahad have a knack for, hammers home the message portrayed in its title and yet the lyrics to this second song could as easily be about political leaders as they could the break-up of a long term relationship; lyrical double meanings a skill constantly employed.

For a song nearly a decade old, that 'I Could Be God' still has the power to stop you in your tracks and raise every hair on your arms, neck and head and keep them to attention across fourteen minutes of schizophrenic vocals, grating guitars, roaming bass and stunning keyboards, is testament to how powerful a beast it is. From there, most albums would wilt under such a gargantuan statement and yet 'Sidewinder' cleverly changes focus, sparkling yet dark keys aid a slow build towards the romp of 'Memories Of An African Twin', which adds a mesmeric twist. This allows the album's title track a slow build up which rivals '...God' for power and impact and the chameleon-like 'This Life Could Be My Last' to shimmer the album to a glorious close.

Unusually this re-mastered/re-mixed re-issue finds the re-dux handled by the same person who crafted the original, Threshold's Karl Groom doing a stunning job on both. However, this tweaked, smoothed then roughed up version retains the immediacy of the original, while offering something a little different; the odd section of vocals altered in tone, a few little atmospheric splashes brought to the fore. Add in an "alternate" take of 'Termination' and '...Last' (the addition of which removes the "hidden" close that featured on the original) and I simply can't recommend this album highly enough. But then you'd guessed that already, hadn't you…?

Steven Reid

LARS ERIC MATTSSON – 'NO SURRENDER: 25TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION' *(Lion)* PROGRESSIVE

Phew... it seems Lars Eric Mattsson continues to reminisce! Here we have a re-release of his second album 'No Surrender' and as is his fashion, he has re-recorded some portions and re-mixed the whole record.

This '25th Anniversary Edition' is a living testament to the musical genius of the man! Although this was only his second foray, we can still hear him pushing the borders of Progressive Rock, even back then!

As with his recent releases that have appeared in the last few issues, Mattsson has taken these musical creations and re-recorded some sections then re-mixed the lot and even gone as far as to included a never before released track that was certainly meant for the first '...Surrender' album.

Of course he retains the original flavour of each piece; just polishing up the overall production and of those sections that he has re-recorded, he has been faithful to the original spirit. The result is a "fresh" sounding piece of musical history.

As with everything that has come from this musical mastermind, '...Surrender' is still a very accomplished piece of work and one worth possessing, especially if you do not have the original in your Mattsson collection.

For those of us that are newer to Lars Eric Mattsson, 'No Surrender' should be a surprising collection of music, as it displays that true pioneer spirit that is contained within the man and showcasing one more side of this creative giant.

Bruce E.J. Atkinson

RAINBOW – 'THE POLYDOR YEARS' *(Universal/Polydor)* HARD ROCK

It's not exactly a hard sell, is it? Eight classic vinyl albums from one of Hard Rock's most revered and celebrated outfits. That's not to mention one of the best guitarists Rock has ever heard of and three cracking, acclaimed, singers (ask Van Halen or Iron Maiden how difficult that is to pull off). Oh, and don't forget a genuine, stone cold classic, genre defining album, a genuine, stone cold, classic double live opus and a string of hits Commercial Rock bands have aped and reshaped to this very day. Seriously, what's not to like here?

The band in question is of course Rainbow, the guitarist Ritchie Blackmore and the singers Ronnie James Dio, Graham Bonnet and Joe Lynn Turner. The album is 'Rising', live opus 'On Stage' and the hits include 'Since You've Been Gone', 'I Surrender', 'All Night Long' and 'Street Of Dreams'. Package it all together in a stunning box with faithfully recreated covers, gatefold and inner sleeves, pictures, lyrics and centre of the record art (I still love the eye staring back as it rotates on 'Straight Between The Eyes') and really... this is a box-set for any Hard Rocking vinyl enthusiast.

The opportunity to chart the Rainbow story from the Dio led 1970's Hard Rockers on 'Ritchie Blackmore's Rainbow', 'Rising', 'On Stage' and 'Long Live Rock 'N' Roll', through the rough and tumble Bonnet rasping chart botherers, to the smooth and slick Turner-fronted Commercial Rock sensations is a welcome one. We all know 'Rising' is a Rock tour-de-force and that 'Down To Earth' saw a sudden change in style that brought mainstream radio and chart success. Yet the chance to reacquaint with the energy packed eponymous debut and slightly underrated '...Eyes' and 'Bent Out Of Shape', which almost, but not quite, rival the more celebrated '...Earth' and 'Difficult To Cure', is a strong reminder of just how good this band always were.

If I was to have a couple of complaints, they'd be that it would have been good to have the live compilation 'Finyl Vinyl' as part of this set; the energetic live tracks from Bonnet and Turner from that album were always a highlight and that, disappointingly, the records themselves could have been packed with more care; nearly all of the nine records ('On Stage' is a double remember) were slightly scuffed and covered in fingerprints when I first removed them from their sleeves. However those points really are the only negatives.

For vinyl loving Rainbow fans, if you can afford it (after all vinyl ain't cheap these days), there really is no good reason not to treat yourself to this beautiful box of well-loved goodies.

Steven Reid

BOOKMARK

Rob McKenzie provides an overview of essential reading for music lovers everywhere

Walking around the bookstores over Christmas it struck me that the physical book is alive in terms of new titles on display and hopefully well in terms of sales. Support your local bookshop (or online store!).

'ALL THE SONGS: THE STORY BEHIND EVERY BEATLES RELEASE' JEAN-MICHEL GUESDON & PHILIPPE MARGOTIN *(Black Dog & Leventhal Publishers)*

If, like me, a few years ago you purchased the box-set 'The Beatles – The Original Studio Recordings', then this hefty tome is a major contender to consider buying to accompany your original purchase. Do bear in mind that songs written for others, but not also released by The Beatles are NOT included.

The coverage of each song follows the same structure and categories; Song-writer/ Musicians/When And Where Recorded/ Number Of Takes/Mixing/Technical Team plus general text sub-headed into Genesis and Production. Each of the thirteen Beatles albums is also given a general introduction and placed into fascinating historical context. The volume also contains extensive photographic material.

As a (rather heavy) coffee table book it works on various levels and provides a fascinating insight for the casual observer and the more serious student of The Beatles' music. The musical interests of some readers of this magazine will not extend back as far as the mid-1960s, but the key thing is that one should not forget that there was a huge shift and seed-change to popular music at this time, and that had this not occurred, then the musical landscape now would undoubtedly be very different.

The Beatles arguably led the way and went through a further musical revolution themselves around the time they recorded 'Revolver' and the spirit of the Psychedelic era building up in California in 1966 was alive and kicking in the "semi-philosophical and semi-esoteric" lyrics of 'Tomorrow Never Knows'.

This for me is the most fascinating period of Beatles music, but I have found that delving more deeply into this seminal band has yielded rich rewards right across the journey of their recording history.

Although much of what has been included in this volume may well have been assembled from previously published sources, Jean-Michel Guesdon & Philippe Margotin have produced an easily digested guide that is heartily recommended.

Review provided by Paul Jerome Smith

Hardback, 672 pages, 11" x 8.7", colour and black & white imagery throughout.
Details at www.blackdogandleventhal.com

'EXCESS ALL AREAS' SUE RICHMOND *(Backbeat Books)*

This nicely packaged, easy reading book provides a "light-hearted look at the demands and idiosyncrasies of Rock icons on tour". Essentially an illustrated book about 1980's Rock/Pop acts listing their "riders" – which, if you are a fan of Spinal Tap, are lists of everything a band requires backstage from hard liquor to very small pieces of unfoldable bread.

This makes for an interesting read even though the focus of many of the riders is about healthy food as opposed to bottles of lager. Not wishing to give the game away on any of the bands and solo artists included (which range from Black Sabbath to Eminem to Westlife in terms of diversity), the main challenge for the hosting venues are the very specific requests made (e.g. Stella Artois brewed in Belgium and not the U.K.).

The book's illustrations by Wilf Hanson are good fun whilst a bit abstract and the layout is good – this is very much a birthday gift or stocking filler type book. No comments are given on the bands' riders although the author has ordered them so they get more extreme as you progress through the book. Oh and by the way, one of the riders asks for Absinthe but strictly only for after the show is finished – buy the book to find out who.

Hardback, 133 pages, 9.2" x 9.2", colour illustrations throughout
Details at www.backbeatbooks.com

'NIRVANA FAQ' JOHN D. LUERSSEN *(Backbeat Books)*

Subtitled, 'All That's Left To Know About The Most Important Band Of The 1990s', this new addition to the FAQ series covers the story of Nirvana. The debate on whether Nirvana deservedly killed Hair Metal or undeservedly did so carries on, though I suspect it is the latter for most Fireworks readers. However, this subject doesn't really come up here as the book is written from an adoring fan's point of view about the band. The author does admit that Kurt Cobain (early on) liked Boston and his first gig was to see Sammy Hagar so the book is not totally biased, but I would say it nearly is.

The book gives a very detailed account of Cobain's life (and the other band members to be fair) and it is an interesting read, but you really have to be a convinced fan to see any type of romance in the tragedy of how he couldn't handle fame. Instead, it reads as a very unfortunate psychological report of Cobain's "not terrible but not brilliant" childhood, his life in squalor before fame and sadly his life in a different type of squalor after fame.

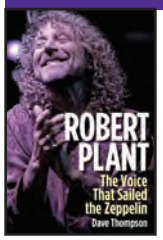
As the book promises, after reading it there can't be anything left to know about a band which was so short lived. Whether they spelt the end for Rock as we knew it or not, the band did do some great songs. As for riches, Cobain's estate was reported as being worth $450 million on his death.

The book ends with the story of Courtney Love's battles with the remaining Nirvana members Krist Novoselic and Dave Grohl and, of course, the latter's move to being the front-man of The Foo Fighters.

As the book promises, after reading the book there can't be anything left to know about a band which was so short lived. Highlights of the book's "factlets" were the cringe-worthy spats between Cobain and Axl Rose and between Novoselic and Duff McKagan. The short sections make this lengthy book less intimidating; it is a bit of an investment of time but worth it.

Paperback, 428 pages, 9" x 6", some b&w photos.
Details at www.backbeatbooks.com

'ROBERT PLANT, THE VOICE THAT SAILED THE ZEPPELIN' DAVE THOMPSON *(Backbeat Books)*



Timed to nicely coincide with Robert Plant's recent well-received album 'Lullaby And the Ceaseless Roar', this book (by Dave Thompson) focuses on Plant as an individual be it as the Led Zeppelin front-man or as a solo star.

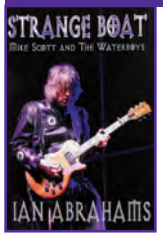
Thompson uses the parallel of Plant's start in the music world back in the sixties and the reboot of his career when Zep folded (after John Bonham died), in order to structure the book. As a consequence, the odd numbered chapters cover Plant's pre-Zeppelin career (commencing with his childhood story) and the even numbers start in 1980. It sounds complicated on paper but works well and makes the book interesting from the start, rather than reading about his rites of passage into the Rock world before getting to the meat of the matter. Having said that, before joining Zeppelin, it would appear Plant was very much a journeyman of changing bands and even musical styles to get a better gig.

The book certainly relays the message that Plant has never wanted to rely on his Zeppelin pedigree when he went solo; he forged a totally new career for himself with many more solo albums under his belt than Zeppelin ones. His changes of style from back to basics Blues to the more technology-based 1980s albums are very much a result of Plant re-inventing himself and striving to remain relevant. That reputation remains intact to this very day. The book reiterates the point that Plant probably refused to reform Zeppelin because it could not exist without Bonham but equally as important he wanted to prove his worth and forge his own path.

I learnt a lot about Plant from this book; although he did not directly contribute to the contents, Thompson's sources are considerable and the book is exceptionally well written.

Hardback, 256 pages, 9.2" x 6.2", two black & white and colour photo sections
Details at www.backbeatbooks.com

'STRANGE BOAT, MIKE SCOTT AND THE WATERBOYS' IAN ABRAHAMS *(Gonzo Multimedia)*



This is the updated version of the book first published in 2007 bringing the story of Mike Scott and The Waterboys up to date. As the book emphatically tells us – Scott and TW are interchangeable and so the story of the changes of personnel and musical direction of the band are in effect down to Scott's personal journey.

The book really is only for true fans of the man. The majority of people know of the band due the their purple patch 'Whole Of The Moon' period and of course this is covered, but the rest of Scott's long, varied and less commercially successful story will be of less interest to some.

The story of Scott/TW is told via interviews with ex-members of the band and third party quotes and stories from Scott himself. It is a painstakingly told story and should satisfy the aforementioned fans who want to know more about the man and his music.

Paperback, 172 pages, 9" x 6", a few black and white photos
Details at www.gonzomultimedia.co.uk

'THE HEAVIEST ENCYCLOPEDIA OF SWEDISH HARD ROCK AND HEAVY METAL EVER!' JANNE STARK *(Premium Publishing)*

Potentially hernia-inducing to lift, and bone-in-foot damaging if dropped, this awe-inspiring coffee table volume requires a sturdy resting place. The culmination of Stark's research over many years and preceded by two earlier tomes (which were somewhat smaller – the previous version having "only" four hundred and forty-two pages), the present opus contains information on over three thousand six hundred bands with extensive biographies, exhaustive discographies and an index comprising nearly twelve thousand names. The introduction alone is valuable for its description of genres and there one will also find "honourable mentions of peripheral bands".

Stark is not only a consummate writer and researcher and an excellent graphic designer, but is also an integral part of the Swedish Rock and Metal scene having been a guitar hero in BALLS, Baltimoore, Constancia, Locomotive Breath, Overdrive and now currently Grand Design. The total absorption into his subject matter is abundantly clear from his detailed comments, useful opinions (such as "worth checking out despite the programmed drums") and the twelve pages devoted to Yngwie Malmsteen…

…And then there is a fabulous thirteen track bonus CD nestling on the inside back cover of the book, full details of which are given on its facing page and there are some really great surprises, believe me!

This Encyclopaedia goes to show that there REALLY must be something in the water in Sweden given that a country with less than ten million people can have such a prodigious Rock and Metal music scene.

Review provided by Paul Jerome Smith

Hardback, 912 pages, 11" x 9", colour imagery throughout + CD
www.premiumpublishing.com

SHORT - SHARP - SHOTS OF - ROCK!

Steven Reid takes a look at new EP releases

Yes, I know you were all Christmased out long ago, but in case you missed it Aerosmith legend **JOE PERRY** released a neat little four track digital festive frolic simply called 'MERRY CHRISTMAS' back when the man in red was doing his thing. An instrumental, guitar led 'White Christmas' is a tasteful intro, while a Honky-Tonk 'Run Run Rudolph' finds Perry in good voice. A faithful but Bluesy 'Silent Night' is really rather beautiful, while 'Santa Claus Is Back In Town' is another Blues stomp that's full of festive spirit and crackling guitar licks. Snap up the yuletide cheer and save it for when you next holly your berries, mistle your toes and egg your nogs!

It would take the entire SSSOR column to list the amazing contributors to the **DUTCH METAL FOR SERIOUS REQUEST**, who recorded a tremendous and surprising version of Frankie Goes To Hollywood's 'POWER OF LOVE'. So let's just say that with members of Nightwish, Epica, The Gathering, Ayreon, Within Temptation, Delain and Xandria involved, this is a truly special release. All proceeds go to the Red Cross but honestly the song is good enough to merit your contribution without the worthy charity aspect. Head to www.poweroflove.nl to add to the 9000 Euros already raised.

Veterans of the Thrash scene **SODOM** return with a roar as they hunt for the 'SACRED WARPATH'. The title track is the sole studio cut but it's a good one, as this battle hardened German outfit simply bulldoze their message home. Three live tracks 'The Saw Is The Law' (with its "Thrash-Ramones" intro), 'Stigmatized' and 'City Of God' make up the rest of the EP; a hit hard and heavy ethos delivered by the barrow-load. One for fans only, but happy fans they'll be.

Having opened for Crashdiet, Faster Pussycat and Enuff Z'Nuff you might think **NEW BABYLON** would be Sleaze-ridden Glamsters. Yet while singer Wolf does have more than a hint of W. Axl Rose about him, debut EP 'MY NEW BABY' has a much more Hard Rock approach. Think Voodoo Six taking the feet from under Skid Row with Slash riding shotgun and you have 'Can't Stop' and 'The Big House Of Love'. However where this lot really stand out is through the killer grooves they throw out, each of the songs getting you shaking your head, strutting your stuff and throwing all manner of unseemly shapes. Seriously killer and this issue's "must have" EP.

Recovering from a critical mauling in Brides Of Destruction, singer London Le Grand has decamped from L.A. to Sweden and created **ROCKSTARS ON MARS**. And you know what? He's just about hit the nail where it needs to be smacked. Shimmying latter day Bang Tango into a Sleazier framework ROM kick up a storm of lipstick 'n' leather on this self-titled effort; five songs from the their 'Demo No1' a great introduction as 'Tequila N' Gin' becomes the ramshackle delight its name suggests and '2 Kool For Skool' a Vain-like kick to the nether regions. Three newer tracks round things out, 'Headbone' a straight forward Rocker and 'Bleeding Hearts' a more considered saliva stained slowie. ROM have landed, resistance is futile.

It's always interesting to read what a band thinks of themselves, **WORSHIP OF THE WOLF** and their self-titled effort are billed as Prog. However while there are Progressive elements to what WOTW howl, this is more like slow methodical Rock with a few Avant-garde moments and some clever arrangements than it is Genesis. Across five songs however, it's all a little bland and forgettable. Guitarist Henrik Von Harten knows how to groove and lay down challenging melodies, however some "draw you in" hooks and the odd catchy moment would make the world of difference. There's bags and bags of promise here but it's hidden under more ideas than this music can realise.

Madness I tell you, madness! Run, run like the wind…and yet even when Death Metal vocals and riffs tumble forth there's such a Progressive feel here that I simply can't help shredding my air-guitar, singing along with the crazy clean vocals and convulsing as the drums explode. And yet 'Monster' and 'Away' might just scare the brown stuff from you. The EP is called 'TRANSFORM' and **ENTROPIA** know how to do just that... a lot. They're really good, they're from Colombia, you might like them, you might not…

Here's twenty minutes of grin inducing good times. Power-Pop-Punk-Rock specialists **EUREKA MACHINES** serve up a five track 1980's EP' featuring covers of The Bangles, Kim Wilde, Adam Ant, Billy Joel and Freiheit. Everything from 'Walk Like An Egyptian' to 'Kids In America' is thoroughly Eureka'd into vital blasts of fun that prove a good song is a good song. And the reason for all this frivolity? Well, it's the Pledge launch of the band's fourth album 'Brain Waves'. Put your money up for that and this little beauty arrives in your inbox as part of the deal!

Two new tracks (a double a-side) from a band who've been too quiet for too long finds **SLAM CARTEL** in fine form. 'HYPNOTISED' is a belter, reserved and assured but brimming with well paced confidence and the sort of gentle persuasion that finds it residing in the mind for a long time to come. While 'VANISHING WORLDS' marries a staccato riff to a chorus that makes you sit up and take notice. There's a plethora of straight-up Rock around at the moment but not much with the up-tempo, up-beat vibe the Slams bring to town. An excellent return and considering they've changed singer and lead guitarist since we last heard from them, quite remarkable.

Romping along on the crest of Symphonic Prog are keyboard heavy, choral voiced, riff mongers **NOCTURNA**. 'LUCIDITY' is their debut and it finds them leaving behind their "dark period" (so it says here anyway…). Two short numbers are used to set scenes, the self-explanatory 'Introduction' and 'Interlude' allowing the other four selections to be scorching examples of what happens when you remove Dragonforce from their warp drive, or extract a smidge of the intensity from Firewind. Add in swathes of synths and hey presto, you have 'Revelations', 'Gaining Solace' and 'Cast Assured'. Singer James Davis has impressive range and yet it's his engaging tone which impresses most, while guitarist Thomas Frost has been called the U.K.'s answer to Gus G (he's that good!). As debuts go, this is tasty.

Having been a fixture of the Greek Prog Metal scene for over ten years, **AGNOSIA** are back with a new singer, drummer and EP entitled 'A BLOT ON THE LANDSCAPE'. The singer in question is Takis and he fits this style perfectly, his James Labrie-esque tone and confident delivery exactly what you'd expect. However he adds a Bruce Dickinson-like power to the mix raising the ambitious, well realised 'A Blessing In Disguise' far above the norm. Yes Dream Theater and Fates Warning are maybe a little too blatantly leant upon across five of six songs here and yet 'In Awareness' is a stunning piano/strings/spoken word-led piece of Prog that shows this lot have so much more to offer. '...Landscape' is anything but, being a release the Prog Metal faithful should not allow to pass them by.

Once described as the love child of Poison and My Chemical Romance, **FAREWELL MY LOVE** show a completely different side with a beautifully imagined five track acoustic EP. Drummer Chad Kowal has moved to vocals with the departure of Ryan Howell, and he does a mighty fine job in this stripped back setting. Guitarist Logan Thayer has also used the door marked exit, so how long FML will last as a three-piece is anyone's guess, but if these well arranged acoustic tracks, with excellent use of synths, piano and strings, are anything to go by, then FML's future looks bright and 'WRAPPED IN PINSTRIPES'.

Making waves in the "Modern Rock" scene **SKARLETT RIOT** declare 'WE ARE THE BRAVE'. Brave maybe but with giant smacks of guitar raining down it all sounds utterly assured. The riffs may well be gargantuan yet the ace in the SR hole is the less ballsy Lzzy Hale style of young Skarlett herself. She leads from the front and takes no prisoners in the process. Any one of the five tracks on show are worth mentioning but if you're looking to dip a toe in the pool marked RIOT, then head for 'Are You Alive', 'Cascade', or 'Rising', I doubt you'll be disappointed.

You know when a debut is called 'HOLLOW HEARTED' that you're hardly in for a slapstick laugh a minute and so it is with **EMPTY TRAILS**. The name of the game here is 1990s and so you can expect 'Above My Love' to sound like Soundgarden and 'Chasing Down The Drain' to wallow in its own Alice In Chains-like self pity. And yet it's hard not to admit that Rick Lambert (for it is he who writes, sings and plays guitar for ET - Chris Farrell handles drums) doesn't do it well. However this is more a solid start than a spectacular arrival, where a touch more originality wouldn't hurt. Still, if 1990's music is your guilty secret, you could do much worse.

Only two tracks here but even one minute-thirty into 'BREAK THE LIMITS' and NWOBHM, Blue Oyster Cult, Uriah Heep and KISS already spring to mind. Oh, as does Black Sabbath! Huge rumblings of guitar and slices of Doom smash headlong into soaring vocals and stinging solos. Add in sing-along choruses and **HORISONT**, from Sweden (oh, I might have known…) have you hooked, hooked, hooked. 'Yellow Blues' adds some synths to seal the deal in a 1970s slide tackling the 1980s kind of way. Seen as a stop-gap between albums, I can't wait to hear what this lot actually deem fit to grace a full-length release.

Other than a silly name and (admittedly, rather smart) Middle Earth style cover art, Newcastle's **METAL MOTH** are certainly on the 'RISE'. A mix of Sabbath and NWOBHM with a hint of Trouble may not be exactly thinking out of the box, but MM look certain to batter that particular container to pieces. Aggressive yet controlled, retro yet bang up to date, 'Metal Maniac' even finds the double M adding a lip curl of Melodic Rock through a dancing groove that lets up just long enough to introduce a scything raunchy riff. 'Moth To The Flame' is more Metal than Melodic, while 'One More Time' nods to the early 1980's bands that we still wear denim and leather in reverence to. Two further EPs are set to follow later this year - bring 'em on!

Why is it that when U.K. bands try to go all Glam, they end up looking like Bad News rejects? And yet comedy bandanas and hair do's aside, Bournemouth's **SAINTS OF SIN** are pretty convincing. Yes the production is as thin as my excuses for that George Formby album in my collection and singer Rui Brito does veer into "No! Don't go there!" territory with his high notes, however with attitude aplenty 'Last Goodnight' and 'Judgement Day' make 'THE 7 DEADLY SINS' dumb good fun. 'Goodbye' is a cool lighter waver and 'Animal' kicks up a storm in a way that suggests a U.K. Enuff Z'Nuff goosing early Mötley Crüe via the partyness of Poison. They've far to go but keep this up and the journey will be ridiculously good fun.

PLAYLISTS

Ant Heeks rounds up the top picks for this issue, where only a Saintly Revolution can prevent a Total Eclipse of the Chart – now there's a "turn around"…

1

Revolution Saints
'Revolution Saints'
(Frontiers)

2

Eclipse
'Armageddonize'
(Frontiers)

3

Toto
'XIV'
(Frontiers)

Bruce Mee

1. **Eclipse** – Armageddonize
2. **China Sky** – II
3. **The Val** – Heading For The Surface
4. **Toto** – XIV
5. **Bloodbound** – Stormborn

Phil Ashcroft

1. **Toto** – XIV
2. **FM** – Nearfest 2006
3. **Eclipse** – Armageddonize
4. **Todd Rundgren** – At The BBC
5. **Hekz** – Caerus

James Gaden

1. **Revolution Saints** – Revolution Saints
2. **Hayseed Dixie** – Hair Down To My Grass
3. **Doobie Brothers** – Brotherhood
4. **Devil's Train** – II
5. **Stan Bush** – The Ultimate

Dave Scott

1. **Leah** – Kings & Queens
2. **Battle Beast** – Unholy Savior
3. **Issa** – Crossfire
4. **Jimmy Barnes** – Hits Anthology
5. **AC/DC** – The Razors Edge

Steven Reid

1. **Various Artists** – Rock n' Roll Rebels And The Sunset Strip
2. **Care Of Night** – Connected
3. **Beardfish** – +4626-Comfortzone
4. **Eclipse** – Armagaeddonize
5. **Pallas** – wearewhoweare

Ant Heeks

1. **Furyon** – Lost Salvation
2. **Blackberry Smoke** – Holding All The Roses
3. **Eclipse** – Armageddonize
4. **Ammunition** – Shanghaied
5. **Thunder** – Wonder Days

Rob McKenzie

1. **Rock Or Bust** – AC/DC
2. **Agnieszka Swita** – Sleepless
3. **Kasim Sulton** – 3
4. **Veras** – Never Give Up
5. **Tony Carey** – G.O.D.B.O.X.

Ian Johnson

1. **Revolution Saints** – Revolution Saints
2. **Toto** – XIV
3. **The Neal Morse Band** – The Grand Experiment
4. **Care Of Night** – Connected
5. **Battle Beast** – Unholy Savior

Mónica Castedo-López

1. **H.e.a.t** – Live In London
2. **Revolution Saints** – Revolution Saints
3. **Eclipse** – Armageddonize
4. **AC/DC** – Rock Or Bust
5. **Skillet** – Vital Signs

Gary Marshall

1. **Steve Hackett** – Wolflight
2. **The Neal Morse Band** – The Grand Experiment
3. **Lonely Robot** – Please Come Home
4. **Beardfish** – +4626-Comfortzone
5. **Revolution Saints** – Revolution Saints

Carl Buxton

1. **Europe** – War Of Kings
2. **SOTO** – Inside The Vertigo
3. **Eclipse** – Armageddonize
4. **AC/DC** – Rock Or Bust
5. **Sweet & Lynch** – Only To Rise

Ray Paul

1. **Revolution Saints** – Revolution Saints
2. **Diablo Blvd** – Follow the Deadlights
3. **Jethro Tull** – Warchild 40th Anniversary
4. **Year Of The Goat** – Angels Necropolis
5. **Foreigner** – The Best of 4 and More

Dave Bott

1. **Revolution Saints** – Revolution Saints
2. **Otherwise** – Peace At All Costs
3. **The Dreaming** – Rise Again
4. **UFO** – Conspiracy Of Stars
5. **Otherwise** – True Love Never Dies

Duncan Jamieson

1. **Eclipse** – Armageddonize
2. **Toto** – XIV
3. **Stolen Rhodes** – Slow Horse
4. **Franck Carducci** – Torn Apart
5. **Last Autumn's Dream** – Level Eleven

Az Chaudhry

1. **Pallas** – wearewhoweare
2. **Harem Scarem** – Thirteen
3. **White Widdow** – Crossfire
4. **Foreigner** – The Best of 4 and More
5. **Rated X** – Rated X

Alexandra Mrozowska

1. **CETI** – Brutus Syndrome
2. **Revolution Saints** - Revolution Saints
3. **Ammunition** – Shanghaied
4. **House Of X** – House Of X
5. **Trond Holter & Jorn Lande** Present Dracula: Swing Of Death

Mike Newdeck

1. **Smash Into Pieces** – Apocalypse DJ
2. **Papa Roach** – F.E.A.R
3. **Another Perfect Storm** – Another Perfect Storm
4. **Vise Versa** – Living A Lie
5. **Fall Out Boy** – American Beauty/ American Psycho

Dave Cockett

1. **Nozomu Wakai's Destinia** – Requiem For A Scream
2. **Serious Black** – As Daylight Breaks
3. **Level 10** – Chapter 1
4. **Led Zeppelin** – Physical Graffiti
5. **Angra** – Secret Garden

Woody

1. **Corvus** – Chasing Miracles
2. **Issa** – Crossfire

3. **Vega** – Stereo Messiah
4. **Care Of Night** – Connected
5. **Legion** – Animal Inside

Mark Donnelly

1. **Harem Scarem** – Thirteen
2. **Dreadful Minds** – Love Hate Lies
3. **Stargazery** – Stars Aligned
4. **Herman Rarebell & Friends** – Herman's Scorpions Songs
5. **Foreigner** – The Best of 4 & More

Ian Parry

1. **UFO** – Conspiracy Of Stars
2. **Pat Travers** – Live At The Iridium NYC
3. **Diesel** – Into The Fire
4. **Scorpions** – Animal Magnetism
5. **Night Demon** – Curse Of The Damned

Sophie Brownlee

1. **Dirty Thrills** – Dirty Thrills
2. **Autograph** – Sign In Please
3. **Crazy Lixx** – Crazy Lixx
4. **Lionheart** – Unearthed: Radiers Of The Lost Archives
5. **Kim Wilde** – The Best Of

Mick Burgess

1. **Spiritual Beggars** – Earth Blues
2. **Mark Lanegan Band** – Phantom Radio
3. **Shadowband** – Facing The Fallout
4. **Beardfish** – Comfortzone
5. **Katatonia** – Night Is The New Day

Michael Anthony

1. **The Answer** – Raise A Little Hell
2. **Denim Snakes** – Denim Snakes
3. **Jouis** – Dojo
4. **Bob Dylan and the Band** – The Basement Tapes Raw
5. **Corvus Stone** – Corvus Stone II

Steve Swift

1. **The Golden Gods** – ...The Thorny Crown Of Rock And Roll
2. **The Dirty Guv'nahs** – Hearts On Fire
3. **JJ Grey & Mofro** – Ol 'Glory
4. **Mother's Ruin** – Gin Lady
5. **It Bites** – Whole New World

Bruce EJ Atkinson

1. **Rebecca Downes** – Back To the Start
2. **Ammunition** – Shanghaied
3. **Sweet & Lynch** – **Only** To Rise
4. **Level 10** – Chapter 1
5. **Mainstreet** – Second Chance

Alan Holloway

1. **Issa** – Crossfire
2. **Lonely Robot** – Please Come Home
3. **Revolution Saints** – Revolution Saints
4. **Melissa Etheridge** – This Is M.E.
5. **Victorius** – Dreamchaser

Dave Crompton

1. **Ten** – Albion
2. **NTH Ascension** – Ascension Of Kings
3. **Tyrannosaurus Rex** – Unicorn (Deluxe)
4. **Revolution Saints** – Revolution Saints
5. **Dave Kilminster** – And The Truth Will Set You Free

Helen Bradley-Owers

1. **Freddy & the Phantoms** – Times Of Division
2. **Persian Risk** – Who Am I
3. **AC/DC** – Rock or Bust
4. **T Ride** – T Ride
5. **Cat Stevens** – The Very Best Of

Brent Rusche

1. **Eclipse** – Armageddonize
2. **Ammunition** – Shanghaied
3. **Revolution Saints** – Revolution Saints
4. **The Storyteller** – Sacred Fire
5. **Whyzdom** – Symphony For A Hopeless God

Mike Ainscoe

1. **Black Star Riders** – Killer Instinct
2. **Led Zeppelin** – 2 (Remastered)
3. **Eclipse** – Armageddonize
4. **Beardfish** – +4626-Comfortzone
5. **H.e.a.t** – Live In London

FIRIN' ON ALL SIX!

BIGELF
Newcastle: O2 Academy 2
13 November 2014

In most bands, the keyboard player is more often than not banished to the side of the stage out of harm's way. But not so in American Prog Rock band Bigelf where Damon Fox took centre stage imprisoned on both sides by an impressive array of vintage keyboards from Mini Moogs, Hammond Organs and the king of Prog instruments, the Mellotron.

For a fair few years it looked as though Bigelf would be unable to capitalise on the success of their 'Cheat The Gallows' album as internal divisions and personal issues threatened to tear the band apart. After a long period of inactivity, it was former Dream Theater drummer Mike Portnoy who urged Fox, who has recently worked with Lisa Marie Presley and former 4 Non Blondes singer Linda Perry, to take up the gauntlet once more. Fast forward a couple of years and everything was back on track.

On the second date of their biggest headlining tour so far (and their first ever show in Newcastle), Bigelf were shoehorned onto the small Academy 2 stage with bassist Duffy Snowhill and last minute stand in John Wesley, the hugely classy guitarist from Porcupine Tree, perched either side of the stage as they flanked Fox's enormodrome keyboard rig that made the bridge of the Starship Enterprise look like an Airfix toy.

Fox himself was the ringmaster of the show, decked out in a top hat and enough guy-liner to make Johnny Depp weep as he straddled two banks of keyboards. You'd have thought that this would have restrained his performance somewhat, but nothing could be further from the truth as he made full use of what little space he had to maximum effect.

Their style comes across like a collision between The Beatles and Black Sabbath, with a judicious hint of ELO, Queen and Sweet and this created a toxic blend of unique and quirky Progressive Rock that was both scintillating and hugely addictive while being bathed in wonderful melodies and atmospheric textures that weaved around the complex song structures. Their latest album 'Into The Maelstrom' was healthily represented throughout the set with 'Alien Frequency' and 'Edge Of Oblivion' both selections that transposed well onto the stage. It was unfortunate that 'Mr Harry McQuhae', a major highlight from the album and a heart wrenching tribute to their fallen band mate A.H.B Butler-Jones, was absent from the set.

While it may all sound over serious and self-important, the show was anything but that as the imposing and hugely charismatic Fox kept things light hearted and he enjoyed regular interaction with the enthusiastic Newcastle crowd and with any luck a return visit on a bigger stage may not be too far off.

Mick Burgess

MATT SCHOFIELD, BEN POOLE
Chester: Live Rooms
18 November 2014

Blues night at the Live Rooms in Chester is always a very civilised affair with tables and booths to watch from, as well as a bar to lean against. This evening the venue provided a host to admire the skills of two of the U.K.'s, if not the world's, top Blues guitarists. Matt Schofield has been recognised as such in numerous professional and public votes; he has also been inducted into the Blues Hall of Fame several years ago and released possibly his best album to date back in April. Before the main event, we were treated to another fine performer, albeit an up and coming one in the shape of Ben Poole.

After some successful dates of his own and a live album recorded at the Albert Hall getting positive reviews [see this issue's New Releases - Ed], he served up a great helping of his own style. The set mainly featured tracks from that recorded show. Poole, aided by Sam Wade on drums and Pepe Le Moko on bass, delivered a strong set that proved we will likely be seeing his own name right up there as a class act very soon. Bereft of keyboards, the three-piece still created a full sound with highlights that included the slow Blues of 'Hanging In The Balance' – written as a tribute to Gary Moore – and a rousing version of Otis Redding's 'Mr Pitiful'. With this showing, Poole is definitely a name to keep an eye on.

It's ten years since Schofield's first album brought his skills to the world's attention and although he has come far, he still comes across as an affable, down to earth guy who just loves to play. Whether it is the Royal Albert Hall or a local club, you'll still get the heart and soul of this man through his guitar.

Again, surprisingly considering his usual Hammond Organ line-up, we got a conventional guitar, bass, drum trio, which meant we got plenty of Schofield's guitar work on show which was certainly no bad thing. Right from the opening of 'From Far Away' from latest album 'Far As I Can See', Schofield's playing was smooth and fluid and he comfortably handled the rhythm work that the keyboards would usually have filled. Influenced more by the traditional Delta style Blues than Poole's playing has been, there was plenty of room to improvise and extend a few blistering solos with 'Sifting Through The Ashes' being another highlight. Almost by nature Blues guitar solos can be self-indulgent, but the sheer quality of this display kept the audience mesmerised. And let's not forget what a fine singer Schofield is too, which provided a soulful foil to some of the guitar histrionics. 'Everything', another from the latest album, along with 'Shipwrecked' from 2011's 'Anything But Time' were two examples of this.

All in all, this was an excellent night in the hands of two of the finest exponents of Blues guitar around. Different in style certainly they may be, but in a way that complimented each other when combined into one show. Schofield showed that he's still the master, but give it a similar ten years from Poole's first album and he'll surely be recognised alongside the best.

Ian Parry

JOANNE SHAW TAYLOR, BERNIE MARSDEN
London: Shepherd's Bush Empire
19 November 2014

As a huge fan of classic Whitesnake and a great admirer of Bernie Marsden, I was more than a little excited when the Bluesman wandered out onto the stage of the Shepherd's Bush Empire. Accompanied only by fellow guitarist Jim Kirkpatrick, the pair armed with acoustic guitars, they began the set with 'Linin' Track' (which brought to mind Aerosmith's 'Hangman Jury') and 'Wedding Day', both from the excellent new 'Shine' album. I was struck not only by Marsden's wonderful six-string talent and earthy, soulful vocals but also his relaxed, down to earth and friendly demeanour. Despite the fact that he was playing to a capacity crowd, he managed to make it feel like an evening with a few close friends. The real magic began for me when the duo launched into Whitesnake's 'Till The Day I Die' and a sublime version of 'Ain't No Love In The Heart Of The City' which nearly brought a tear to my eye. The classics kept on coming, with 'Trouble' and 'Ain't Gonna Cry No More' before Marsden stopped to tell the tale of how he tried – and failed – to get Peter Green to appear on his cover of Fleetwood Mac's 'Dragonfly' that graces his latest album. The song itself followed, highlighting Marsden's exquisite lead playing – his tone, touch and feel were simply breathtaking. A beautiful version of Whitesnake's 'Here I Go Again' finally brought the curtain down on a thoroughly enjoyable set that was over way too soon.

Thankfully my sadness at Marsden's departure was quickly washed away by the arrival of Joanne Shaw Taylor to the stage. She opened with 'Mud Honey', the track that kicks off her stunning latest studio album ('Dirty Truth') and it was immediately apparent that live is the best environment in which to appreciate her talent. No matter how good her studio albums might be – and they are undoubtedly very good – on the live stage it became clear just what a fine guitarist Taylor really is. She was a wonderfully natural and emotive player; the notes flowed directly from her heart to her fingertips. By the time 'Watch 'Em Burn' was unfurled I was totally enthralled, lost in the all encompassing atmosphere conjured up by the smooth, fluid guitar flurries and Taylor's rich, smoky voice. A small detail perhaps, but worth mentioning nonetheless, was the stage lighting that really played its part during this headline set. It was simple but splendidly effective and complemented the music and understated performance perfectly. I can honestly say there was no low point in the Taylor set, no moment when a trip to the bar seemed in order. As for highlights, well there were almost too many to mention... the sweet swing and groove of 'Diamonds In The Dirt', the touching fragility of 'Tried, Tested And True' and the excellent 'Wrecking Ball' (complete with an earnest disclaimer of any connection to the dreadful Miley Cyrus…) each one was a gem. However my night was made complete when Marsden re-emerged and joined Taylor for a rousing, life-affirming run through of 'Walking In The Shadow Of The Blues' – definitely one of my musical moments of the year.

Overall this was a tremendous evening, spent in the company of two exceptional talents. When the chance comes round again to see either of these artists I suggest you grab it with both hands – you won't regret it.

Chris Kee

SEETHER
Manchester: The Ritz
19 November 2014

It had been just two weeks since I previously visited the Ritz in Manchester to see Lacuna Coil; my first visit to the venue in a good twelve years and yet was a second visit in quick succession to see Seether. Though it was busy on my LC visit, the venue seemed to me even busier for this event. What was also noticeable was that the audience was slightly more mature. I don't know whether that was an indication of Seether's popularity compared to that of LC or whether a large number of people that attended this event were brought up on a diet of Pearl Jam and Nirvana some twenty years earlier (during their heyday). The Seether sound is comparable to a number of acts from the Grunge era and though it is an era I look upon with little fondness, I do like Seether a lot and own all their recorded output.

At nine, the band made a low-key entrance to a rapturous welcome and proceeded to tear into 'Gasoline' from the debut 'Disclaimer'. Unfortunately what was apparent from the off was that the sound was well below par. For some strange reason lead singer Shaun Morgan was positioned stage left (as I looked at it) and there was a significant amount of feedback from his station and the vocals were a bit of a muffled mumble beneath the bass and drums. This continued through 'Needles' and 'Rise Above This' before things were rectified somewhat and the mix had a better balance.

Drummer John Humphrey gave his kit a merciless pummeling at the rear whilst bass player Dale Stewart threw endless shapes and was in continuous motion.

Morgan was content to concentrate on his role as band-leader and there is no between song banter. The Seether touring line-up was bolstered by the addition of a second guitarist, Bryan Wickmann, and this beefed up the sound considerably.

What I did find rather distracting were the regular guitar changes between songs. Morgan would strum a four or five chord riff that would play on a continuous loop until the bass and guitars were swapped; it broke the momentum and gave the impression that things were a bit under-rehearsed. In fact the songs themselves had a loose feel, as though it was just a Seether jam session.

All these issues aside, it was still an entertaining show. The mosh-pit went nuts during a cover of Nirvana's 'Heart-Shaped Box' and threatened to spill over into the wheelchair section but things soon calmed down during a stripped back version of 'Broken'. The newer material included 'See You At The Bottom', 'Words As Weapons' and 'My Disaster', each fitted in nicely amongst the more recognisable favourites. 'Remedy' brought things to a close after seventy-five minutes and it was good to get back out into the fresh air.

What Seether do, they do well. This was a no-frills, gimmick free Rock show and despite a few irritating technical problems, a satisfying way to spend a November evening.

Dave Bott

TYKETTO, BAD TOUCH
Manchester: Club Academy
19 November 2014

For a Wednesday night in Manchester, the Club Academy was buzzing and it was great to see so many people had turned out to give Tyketto such a fine welcome.

Having seen support act Bad Touch several times before and always enjoyed them, they were as entertaining as ever, where moustachioed singer Stevie warmed up the crowd with his charismatic performance. They were a big hit with the Tyketto diehards, which only proved that there is hope for the scene within the younger up and coming Melodic Rock acts.

Although the sound was not the best at the start, Tyketto delivered a great set; they started with one of my most recent favourites 'Dig In Deep' before they gave us plenty of classics like 'Lay Your Body Down', 'Strength In Numbers', 'Burning Down Inside', 'Wings', 'End Of The Summer Days' and much more.

Guitarist Chris Green has come a long way since being in Pride, the Brighton-based band who toured with Firehouse and Vaughn in the early 2000s. I think he's has really come into his own with Tyketto. His playing was faultless and he was definitely filled the enormous shoes left by Brooke St James. With Chris Childs having taken over bass duties, whether it be for the long or the short term, this was also a crowd pleaser and he worked very well with Michael Clayton Arbeeny as the backbone of the band. The addition of ex-Ten and current Rage Of Angels keyboardist Ged Rylands just added extra depth to this already outstanding band.

Of course, I can't do a review of the show without a mention of vocalist Danny Vaughn who never fails to impress and is one of the best front-men of the last twenty years. He's still at the top of his game and I urge anyone who hasn't seen him in the Ultimate Eagles (also featuring Childs), to go the next time they're on tour. Tonight, Vaughn treated us to 'Haunted' from his own back catalogue, which I have always loved. The set wouldn't be complete though without the song that everyone came to hear, the classic 'Forever Young' which went down a belter as ever.

It was a fantastic night and I can't wait to see Tyketto on the Monsters Of Rock Cruise in April.

Sue Ashcroft

THRESHOLD
London: Islington O2 Academy
20 November 2014

In the interview in issue 65 the question of Threshold's lack of touring in the U.K., this being just one of two dates in their home country on this tour, was broached and if anyone needed justification of the band's stance on the subject then tonight was it. The venue can only have been a third full which is at odds with the numbers they pull in for shows in mainland Europe; this is a huge shame as they make great albums and they certainly know how to put on a live show.

Thanks to the Internet I was able to identify that tonight's set differed from that played earlier in the tour and that may have been a mistake, as from my perspective the blue touch-paper wasn't really ignited until the last third of the set when they strung together a magical selection of 'Lost In Your Memory', 'Watchtower On The Moon', 'Pilot In The Sky Of Dreams', 'Mission Profile' and 'The Box'.

That's not to say there weren't highlights earlier in the set, because there were; it was basically that the flow, consistency and quality weren't there in the same measure. Threshold opened with 'Slipstream' which was a fine start but 'The Hours', 'Liberty, Complacency, Dependency' and 'Ground Control' felt rather laboured and lacked in the melody stakes by comparison.

However, 'Unforgiven' followed and it was utterly superb in its spine-tingling brilliance. It was a very special moment indeed; in fact I'd go as far as saying it was exceptional. I thought that was the point when the set would take off but unfortunately 'Siege Of Baghdad', 'Part Of The Chaos' and 'Coda' didn't really do the trick. The middle of that triumvirate was rather shouty and repetitive while 'Siege…' lacked a really decent hook. Interestingly, these were the two oldest tracks from the band's catalogue aired tonight and an era of their history that doesn't resonate with me.

Fortunately, the best was yet to come and the run to the line mentioned above was more than worth waiting for and was really a fabulous selection of songs. However, much to my chagrin I had to depart (as I noticed others had done before me) during 'The Box', due to travel considerations, which was a shame as it was a track I'd particularly looked forward to. This meant I missed the encore, which had to have breached the curfew. I do wish bands would have a thought about the fact that people have to travel and may have work the next day.

Oh, I also know what Damian Wilson needed for Christmas... a decent razor as his beard was way out of control!

Gary Marshall

LAZULI, MOON SAFARI
London: The Borderline
29 November 2014

My pal Jon was one of several I heard opine that it was desirable for Moon Safari to be first on stage so they could slip away early if the apparently eclectic Lazuli proved too challenging. Not only did Jon stay the distance but as we walked to the Underground he expressed the opinion that they may just have stolen the show, which is saying something when MS were so good. It was obvious to me that Lazuli both won over many sceptics and were truly humbled by the crowd response.

MS are one of my favourite bands and tonight they didn't disappoint. 'Lover's End Part I' was a wonderful opener and clearly pleased many in the audience, but 'Heartland', 'Too Young To Say Goodbye' and 'Mega Moon' were truly sensational. It still amazes me that guys as young as MS are so accomplished, have created music this exquisite and can play it without resorting to computers; their ability with vocal harmonies is extraordinary.

They teased the audience with the announcement that the next song would be the last and then they proceeded to play the epic 'Lover's End Part III'. This wasn't the end and all six band members moved to the stage front for the delightful A Cappella 'Constant Bloom'. The encore of 'Methuselah's Children' was probably their only slip up during the night; for me it didn't quite work as well as what had gone before. That said, they were still brilliant.

Lazuli took a while to set up and the atmosphere waned by the time they finally started their set, but they quickly won the crowd over. Whilst being Prog, their songs are short and sharp. The mix of styles from wistful to Middle Eastern-influenced and on to heavy kept things interesting and the musicality was terrific. I admit the fact that they sang in French was a concern but as it happened this mattered not one iota as the songs had such strong hooks and choruses. The band members' versatility was also evident with flugelhorn and electric marimba that all featured at various times. As much as I enjoyed their music, I loved their evident joy at the crowds' reaction.

Claude Leonetti lost the use of his left arm in an accident, to enable him to remain in the band they created an instrument for him; the sounds he produced from the Léode were pretty spectacular as was his duel with guitarist Gédéric Byar who also obviously knew how to riff.

The wonderful set ended with all five gathered around the Marimba as they played a lovely tune which morphed into a snippet of Peter Gabriel's 'Solsbury Hill'. A superb evening.

Gary Marshall

FM, LAWLESS
Holmfirth: Picturedrome
29 November 2014

Tonight's proceedings were kicked off by Stoke-on-Trent band Lawless with their great brand of eighties-inspired Melodic Rock. The majority of the set was taken from their 2013 debut 'Rock Savage', including 'Black Widow Ladies', 'Step In' and 'S.O.S.' with a couple from their recently released album 'R.I.S.E', which included the title track. Lawless finished their enjoyable set with the gloriously titled 'Heavy Metal Heaven'.

This was my third time seeing the mighty FM this year and it was final date of the second half of the tour to celebrate their 30th anniversary. The set-list was only a couple of songs different from the show that I attended in Wakefield back in August.

As with most bands, playing The Holmfirth Picturedrome for the first time, FM were immediately impressed with the venue. It offers a large stage, great acoustics and a special atmosphere with the majority of the crowd having an almost perfect view, no matter their position relative to the stage.

The set-list was made up of new songs from last year's splendid 'Rockville' album and tracks from across their career dating back to 1986's 'Indiscreet'; one of the greatest British debut albums of all time. What was so impressive was there was no dip in the quality over the whole ninety minutes, just one high class song after another. They kicked off with 'Tough Love' from the aforementioned 'Rockville' before this rolled into the classic 'I Belong To The Night' with the customary backing vocals from all the fans. The band played with permanent smiles on their faces and enjoyed every minute in the limelight and certainly they appreciated the reciprocal reaction from the avid fans.

The album that got the most songs taken from it was the much underrated sophomore album 'Tough It Out'; selections included 'Bad Luck', 'Let Love Be The Leader', 'Does It Feel Like Love', 'Burning My Heart Down' and the title track where Steve Overland ditched his guitar to sing the lead vocals.

The Blues ballad 'Closer To Heaven' had Overland, whose nickname is "The Voice", at his imperious best. If there is a better live vocalist than Overland at the moment then I have still yet to see them.

Their original keyboard player, as has become the custom with Yorkshire gigs, joined the band on stage, equipped with keytar and luminous, flashing green glasses for the final two songs. 'The Other Side of Midnight' and the brilliant cover of the Rod Stewart classic 'Hot Legs' left everyone to go home with a smile on their face.

A great night and happily for me a tour for 2015 has already been announced.

Mark Donnelly

BONNET
London: Islington O2 Academy
01 December 2014

Graham Bonnet has been a reasonably frequent visitor to his home country over the last decade; on this occasion he came in the shape of the band Bonnet which comprised Beth-Ami Heavenstone on bass, guitarist Conrado Pesinato and the rather entertaining Justin Lack on drums. Tonight the band was clearly keen to do their own songs as well as the inevitable and beloved Rainbow numbers.

The packed O2 Academy was full of anticipation to hear the 'Down To Earth' songs live and no one was disappointed. No less than six songs from the album (including 'Bad Girl' which was the b-side of 'Since You Been Gone') were included in the set, with the only notable omission being 'Eyes Of The World'.

You can't blame Bonnet (the man) giving that one a miss because that must be a hard one to nail each and every night of a tour. Regarding his voice, the power was there and he hit the spot that night; probably the best I have seen him vocally since his tour with Don Airey in 2001. What everyone admires about him generally is that he goes for every note regardless, he doesn't sing around the high or hard bits (unlike many!!) and you have got to love him for that.

As for the non-Rainbow songs; firstly the Alcatrazz rarity 'The Witchwood' came over superbly and the new 'Mirror Lies' worked well being classic sounding but a bit quirky to boot. Bonnet also sang (and played acoustic guitar on) the first song he ever wrote, which was a tribute to the Mod movement during his youth called 'Always Be There' before he launched into a raucous cover of The Beatles 'Eight Days A Week'. Towards the end of the show, Doogie White joined the band and sang backing vocals for the song everyone was waiting for – 'Since You Been Gone'.

It was all great stuff and a great time and I for one look forward to Bonnet's next visit.

Rob McKenzie

MAGNUM, LIBERTY LIES
Preston: 53 Degrees
03 December 2014

It was back in April that I last saw Magnum live, on the first leg of their 'Shadow Garden' tour. The winter dates have seen a few in Europe and back to the U.K. for a few more to warm up for the Hard Rock Hell festival.

First though tonight was a short set from Liberty Lies, being a fair bit heavier they did seem an unusual choice for the support slot but nevertheless put in a rousing and enthusiastic performance. They were not helped by a lighting rig of only plain white which meant they might as well have just left the house lights on. Through no real fault of the band, most of the crowd simply waited politely for them to finish and for the main event to start.

It's hard to know what to say about Magnum. The set was, in most part, the same as that which we saw in April so whilst on one level the show may have been predictable and nothing new it was also, as before, a majestic and triumphant performance.

Magnum's fan base has always been intensely loyal and the venue was packed to capacity tonight, with not only the older fans who have been with them from way back when but plenty of young blood as well. This proved that the band have bridged the generations and manage to keep both the audience and the band themselves full of enthusiasm. As Bob Catley grinned and gestured his way through the set, you got the feeling that he could pretty much let the crowd sing whilst he just conducted and a good time would still be had by all. Al Barrow prowled the stage and also grinned away as if he was the band's biggest fan who had just been given the chance to play with them. Tony Clarkin and Mark Stanway form

the "serious musician" part of the band, but even they raised a smile tonight as they provided the "Magnum backbone" and proved to be the perfect foil for Catley's showmanship.

Although I will admit that personally I've never really taken to 'The Visitation' album, since 2007's 'Princess Alice…' release the band's song-writing has gone from strength to strength. Tonight's set was well balanced with both old and new and heavier and melodic choices. 'Live 'Til You Die' opened and led onto the powerful Rock of 'Black Skies', 'Freedom Day' and 'Black Tattoo'. The middle section of 'Unwritten Sacrifice', 'How Far Jerusalem' and 'Les Morts Dansant' highlighted the insight and sensitivity of Clarkin's lyrics before the set began to build towards its climax of 'All England's Eyes', 'Vigilante' and 'Kingdom Of Madness'. Not surprisingly the encore consisted of the recently re-recorded 'On Christmas Day', another moving, intelligent song that the ever animated Catley delivered with all the passion it deserved, before they closed the set with 'Sacred Hour'.

Magnum are infectious, their music can haul you in both melody-wise and lyrically. Couple that with a presence that exudes such a sense of enjoyment from the band that it would be just wrong for the crowd not to reciprocate. I'll make no excuse for my own personal bias in that I've been a follower of the band for over thirty years, but in that time, they've never been better. With more dates in February they remain a band that shouldn't be missed on tour. Magnum have matured into a Classic Rock institution, and long may they continue in that way.

Ian Parry

PETER GABRIEL
Newcastle: Metro Arena
04 December 2014

For most artists, the opening song is the opportunity for a grand entrance usually featuring a sure-fire crowd favourite complete with a blast of pyrotechnics to get the show started with a bang; Peter Gabriel is not your average everyday artist. Instead Gabriel ambled casually onstage with the houselights on and chatted in a relaxed manner to the audience about the first song which was so early in its development that it had no lyrics, just noises and sounds. What followed was a beautiful piano led ballad with some haunting cello accompaniment giving a compelling insight into the song-writing process. Quite how the song, tentatively titled 'What Lies Ahead', will end up when finished is anyone's guess.

Over the course of the evening, Gabriel delivered the show in three parts. The starters were acoustic-based, the main course more electronic experimentation and the dessert, the sweetest of all, was where he played his chart-busting album in its entirety... in the original running order.

An acoustic 'Shock The Monkey' sounded fresh and reinvigorated in its new arrangement before the house lights were cut and the show started in earnest during the middle of 'Family Snapshot' which thundered into a suitably Funked up 'Digging In The Dirt', complete with bassist extraordinaire Tony Levin and his patented "Funk Fingers" in full flow.

By the time the mega hit 'Solsbury Hill' and the song from the film 'Words With Gods' ('Why Don't You Show Your Self') were played, the evening had hit its stride with a mesmerisingly atmospheric lighting display that featured half a dozen mobile lighting crane units operated by eerie hooded figures.

The centrepiece of Gabriel's show was the performance of 'So' in its entirety, with the actual band that helped create that masterpiece including bass legend Levin who was outstanding. Drummer Manu Katche laid down the grooves while having ex-E-Street band member David Sancious on keyboards along with long-time associate David Rhodes on guitar meant that this was a band of unbeatable pedigree.

From 'Red Rain' through to 'In Your Eyes', Gabriel delivered a nigh on perfect run through, 'Sledgehammer' specifically raised the arena to its collective feet. 'Don't Give Up' was a real show stopper as well where Gabriel dueted with Jennie Abrahamson who reprised Kate Bush's role on the album and her beautifully fragile voice shimmered with emotion.

During the first song of the encore ('The Tower That Ate People'), Gabriel was enveloped in a silk tube that descended from the lighting rig and disappeared only for him to return for 'Biko'. By the end of the song, Gabriel and the crowd were united in voice then each band member left the stage one by one as the crowd sang which left only Katche to provide the rhythm before the drums fell silent. What a dramatic and emotive way to bring a spectacular show to an end.

Mick Burgess

DOWN 'N' OUTZ, VEGA
Bristol: Bierkeller
05 December 2014

Now this took me back. Many years ago I would drag myself along to The Bierkeller to watch some brilliant bands as well as some utter shite (anyone remember Gypsy Queen?). If it was in Kerrang! I would go along and watch, but that was then and this was the present. The venue has been pushed out by the local O2 Academy nowadays, so it was nice to come back to where it all started for a rare Bristol visit from Def Leppard legend Joe Elliot and some of the Quireboys, generally known as Down 'N' Outz.

Before the main event, however, it was the turn of Vega to break their Bierkeller virginity and they did it with a bang. Promoting their superb third album 'Stereo Messiah', they band didn't let up for a second and delivered a forty minute set that sizzled with energy. The likes of 'All Or Nothing' and 'Gonna Need Some Love Tonight' got the crowd worked up as they jumped and sang along aided by the clear and loud sound. Vocalist Nick Workman worked the crowd and was on fine voice, with the rest of the band tight as a drum and they looked like they were having a rather good time. First night of the tour it may have been, but Vega looked and sounded like jitters were something that happened to other people. A set culled from all three albums closed with 'Hands In The Air', which gave the crowd the chance to show they were listening and guitarist Marcus Thurston the chance to pull out his most impressive solos. Watching Vega tonight was like being twenty again and watching FM or Magnum and thinking they were just about the best band in the world, although not as good as Lisa Dominique, of course…

It's a bit disappointing that Joe Elliot and friends hadn't sold out this evening, although there was still a healthy crowd. A few of the band, including the man himself, have been laid low by the flu for a few days, and fingers were crossed for a vocal that wouldn't splutter into a cough half way through. For a band who basically cover Mott The Hoople (plus splinter bands) songs, it was odd that they started with Elton John's 'Funeral For A Friend/Love Lies Bleeding', with Elliot on piano in the corner. This certainly confused a few people, as the low stage meant that they couldn't actually see him and could only view the rest of the band and a lonely microphone centre stage. Luckily he sounded okay when the vocals kicked in, and after he relocated to his rightful place the MTH love started in earnest with British Lion's 'One More Chance To Run'. It was obvious that Elliot wasn't totally confident in his voice, but after he nailed the first high vocals of the set he seemed to relax and as it went on he and the band got better and better. The only downer for me was 'Whizz Kid', which I found dreary and dull, but the rest of the set served to introduce newbies to a bunch of obscure seventies stuff, which is exactly the point of the band. 'Sea Diver' saw Elliot back on the piano for a haunting ballad that's not on either album, whilst the closing couplet of 'England Rocks' and 'Good Times' (nailed better by Jimmy Barnes) had everyone dancing. Elsewhere the superb 'Overnight Angels' impressed, as did the crunching riffage of 'Shouting & Pointing', where the band was occasionally muddy sound wise but mostly spot on.

A great gig all round, but I have to be honest and

say that whilst MTH covers are all well and good, it's Vega who won the night with their tight, high energy performance. Whatever your preference though, this was a fine night of music by two great bands… but not as great as Dumpy's Rusty Nuts, though…

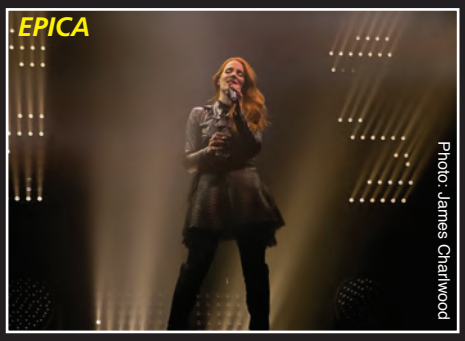
Alan Holloway

EPICA, DRAGONFORCE, NEONFLY
London: HMV Forum
06 December 2014

As was the case at the end of 2013, my penultimate gig of 2014 saw me take a trip to London to once again catch Symphonic heavyweights Epica. This year, the show was a joint headline event with local Power Metallers DragonForce whilst another London-based outfit, Neonfly, completed the bill.

I wasn't actually aware of the opener's involvement until I arrived at the venue and it was a welcome surprise given just a few weeks earlier I'd received Phil Ashcroft's positive review of their latest album (issue 67). The Forum was about half full when Neonfly came out to an orchestral intro over the PA and fired into their five song set. I didn't catch the title of the opening or closing title but the middle portion was made up of the Rocky 'Morning Star', their latest single 'Better Angels', which had some nice twin guitar interplay, and the up-tempo 'Heart Of The Sun'. Overall Neonfly played a lively set, full of banter and encouragement, that was well received by those who were there and I personally found their performance and music highly likeable.

Given my love of Power Metal, I had been excited to see DragonForce since their inclusion was announced. From the moment they started with 'Defenders', there was non-stop movement visually, unstoppable riffs and rhythms sonically and a crowd that were right behind them from the off. 'Fury Of The Storm' continued the onslaught and featured some good harmonies and even a keytar before '3 Hammers' was unleashed with some excellent dual lead and a soaring solo. 'Black Winter Night' had a cool revolving progression and more pace than Usain Bolt and there was a good response to the crowd participation moments in 'Symphony Of The Night' and 'Heroes Of Our Time' where the latter continued the wild pace with some frantic keys, drums and a cracking solo. There were a few slower moments in the otherwise frenetic 'The Sun Is Dead' which provided some respite but it was back to warp speed during 'The Game' with more ridiculously speedy soloing. Yet more hi-velocity axe work was contained within 'Cry Thunder' but a mellower bridge was again quite welcome as by this point almost relentless pace had become a little samey. A fine cover of 'Ring Of Fire' was followed by 'Through The Fire And Flames' with its harmonies, note worthy keys and blistering solo before the set closed with 'Valley Of The Damned'. There can be no argument that technically and enthusiasm-wise, this was a superb performance from a set of classy and talented musicians which the majority of fans enjoyed immensely. But I can't deny that after the hour mark had passed, I became a little weary with the constant high-tempo and (what felt like) a lack of varied pace and sadly (to my surprise) I was a touch relieved when their set ended.



By the time Epica arrived on stage, the venue was pretty well packed bar the very rear. There was a huge roar as they opened with 'The Second Stone' and is always the case with Epica, the light show was visually amazing from the off whilst Simone Simons sounded glorious from the first note. The sound was awesome from where I was standing and this continued into 'The Essence Of Silence', 'Unleashed' (which included a big clap-along, a quality keyboard moment and a huge chorus) and one of my night highlights in 'Storm The Sorrow'; the bass thumped out and the crowd clapped along with vigour as Simons belted out the lyrics. The marvellous lighting simply added to the audio pleasure and both only got better during 'Fools Of Damnation' and 'Victims Of Contingency'. There was another great audience participation moment in the former before the strobe lighting was put to stunning effect in the latter as the standing members moshed away on stage. During 'The Obsessive Devotion' Simons was up on the top platform after which she conducted a large clap-along in the bridge. Jansen took a few moments to speak prior to 'The Fifth Guardian'/'Chemical Insomnia' whilst Coen Janssen received a massive cheer for some keys work before they blasted into 'Sancta Terra'. Epica bought their main set to a close with the pounding rhythms, furious guitars and massive choruses of 'The Last Crusade' and 'Design Your Universe'. Sadly at this point I had to leave due to transport timetables but I am reliably informed the show ended in dazzling fashion with 'Cry For The Moon', 'Unchain Utopia' and 'Consign To Oblivion'. This was another sensational performance from the Dutch Symphonic masters and one I enjoyed immensely after my personal DragonForce disappointment and it was a fine end (bar the early exit) to the evening. If you're into Symphonic Metal... you really must see Epica live... it's truly an experience.

Dave Scott

RIVAL SONS, BLUES PILLS
London: Kentish Town Forum
10 December 2014

Tonight presented a superb matchup of two of the most talked about bands on the Rock circuit at present.

Blues Pills have been gigging tirelessly since the release of their debut album earlier this year. Singer Elin Larsson possesses a voice rich in soul with a powerful Rock edge, and the stage energy of a tornado. 'High Class Woman', 'Little Sun' and 'Devil Man' saw the band pound out some super-charged Rock. 'No Hope Left For Me' is a beautiful and emotional song, and it displayed the diversity in the bands song-writing – the audience was in total and appreciative silence. The set was short and sweet, and a fine introduction to the band; it was a great start to the night's musical party.

Next up was headliner Rival Sons and they could well be the band we have all been waiting for in the Rock world. Tonight they dripped in coolness and also had the songs to back it up. They kicked off with 'You Want To' where it was clear to see Jay Buchanan has left behind his Rock star posturing and long locks and taken on a beatnik look. He danced to the music and postured to his lyrics which all gave a sense of something real.

It's testament to any band when the biggest cheer comes for something new. 'Electric Man', the song Led Zeppelin could have written had they formed today, just oozed Rock 'n' Roll fury. Guitarist Scott Holiday is a fine musician and an individual spirit and he stalked the stage with confidence during 'Good Luck' as the audience danced to the grooving riffs he fired off.

It was hard to ignore the insane drum work of Michael Miley – this man really knew how to play in the pocket, never too fancy and always on the mark. His counterpart on bass guitar Dave Beste looked not unlike John McVie complete with flat cap and he let his fingers do the talking, as he laid down the solid rhythms.

'The Rich And The Poor' and 'Open My Eyes' were melodies you could not ignore and this sold out show was evidence that the Rival Sons music truly has found a loving audience.

Ray Paul

MICHAEL SCHENKER'S TEMPLE OF ROCK
Nottingham: Rock City
12 December 2014

"Guitar Hero" is a term that is thrown around a lot these days. More often than not, the term is applied to players like Joe Satriani, Steve Vai, Slash, Zakk Wylde, etc. One name I would certainly place under the heading, and one which possibly isn't recognised as much, is Michael Schenker. I recall him playing with UFO in the 1970s, and thinking how brilliant he was in his black leather jumpsuit, flowing long, blonde hair and ever present Flying V. He has had his problems but Schenker recognised, just in time, that things needed to change and after leaving the scene for a while he has returned with a vengeance and a new enthusiasm to present the work he is known for.

Tonight was no different with Schenker doing material that spanned his whole career. What caught me by surprise was that he started with 'Doctor, Doctor', which is usually the encore or, at least, one that usually appears quite late on the evening; a bit of a puzzler but there you go. As I noted previously, this is a very good band that Schenker has put together around him. The vocalist is ex-Rainbow man Doogie White, while the rhythm section were with the Scorpions until recently, namely founding members Francis Bucholz and Herman Rarebell. That's not to forget Schenker's right hand man Wayne Findley on guitar and keyboard. As for the man himself, he looked very comfortable up there and prowled around the stage, and smiled all the time because he knew all those people out there were, for ninety minutes at least, his.

The thing about this set was, as it progressed, it became apparent that, despite what has gone on before, Schenker respects the time he spent (and the material he created) with UFO and opted to play the same number of their songs (seven), as his did his own. These included 'Natural Thing', 'Let It Roll', 'Shoot Shoot', 'Too Hot To Handle' and 'Rock Bottom'. Due to the inclusion of Bucholz and Rarebell, there was a fair contingency of Scorpions tracks too, namely 'Lovedrive', 'Coast To Coast' and 'Rock You Like A Hurricane' (with 'Blackout' in the encore). From his own catalogue, four of the seven songs were from the first album; 'Armed And Ready', 'Victim Of Illusion', 'Lost Horizons' and 'Into The Arena'. All firm favourites and, during the latter, I heard something that I had never heard before... Schenker made a mistake... at least it proves he is human. One song, 'Before The Devil Knows You're Dead,' was dedicated to past heroes Ronnie James Dio, Jon Lord and Gary Moore while 'Vigilante Man' was a new song that will appear on the next album.

So it was another enjoyable ninety minutes of excellent music by someone who could have fallen down the crevice of no return but instead has climbed his way back to the apex of his own personal mountain. I thoroughly recommend that you enter the arena at the first opportunity.

Andy Brailsford

TOUCHSTONE, SYMPHONY OF PAIN
London: The Borderline
12 December 2014

It has taken me a while to commit my thoughts to paper on this gig because frankly I wasn't sure what to make of the support act, Symphony Of Pain. I couldn't make out whether they were being serious or acting out a spoof. The comparison that came to mind more than once throughout their set was "Spinal Tap", a view shared by several people I spoke with during the changeover. Musically, they were terrific; how could they not be with Johanne James (Threshold, Kyrbgrinder) behind the drums? In Pam Chowhan they had another star with both her keyboard and violin playing being of the very highest order. Had they been a purely instrumental act I think I'd have enjoyed them far more than was the case.

Unfortunately, lyrically, vocally and visually is where it started to unravel somewhat, hence the ST reference, as the Gothic, Doom-laden lyrics and delivery plus the dodgy make-up seemed at odds with the performers' age and looks.

Touchstone is a band I feel particular empathy with; having seen them way back at the start of their adventure and subsequently reviewed their albums and gigs. On that particular night, they had to make do and mend having just parted company with their female vocalist so Rob Cottingham (keyboards & vocals) had

to take on all the vocal duties. Since then, they have acquired the talents of Kim Seviour (vocals) and grown in stature and presence while in the process they've produced several really cracking albums. They've also toughened up their sound with Adam Hodgson's guitar taking on greater presence.

Tonight was an end of year celebration so they weren't quite as slick as I've seen them but in reality that mattered very little and everyone just had fun; too much so in the case of the guy who kept whistling like he was at a football match mid-song which spoiled many of the quieter moments.

They mixed epic numbers with short songs to great affect and the band clearly enjoyed themselves immensely. The opening blast of 'Mad Hatters' and 'Strange Days' set the bar high and both were full of energy and terrifically played. In Henry Rogers (drums) and Paul Moorghen (bass) they have a rhythm section of the highest quality and a match for anyone.

My personal highlights were the superb 'Zinomorph' and the set-closer 'Oceans Of Time'. The 'Christmas Medley' was my cue to leave (Bah! Humbug) as that was thirteen days too early for all that stuff.

Gary Marshall

CHRIS GLEN AND THE OUTFIT, CRACKERMAN, THE NANOBOTS
Glasgow: Classic Grand
19 December 2014

A silver jump suit with a pair of shades and second pair of specs with lights on the side, a woman dressed as what can only be described as comedian Harry Hill in a lab coat wearing a beanie hat… they were called The Nanobots and they were something – and nothing – to do with The Rezillos. Seven people turned out early to see them and regretted it. So thank the maker for the cracking Crackerman. I know we don't "do" cover bands in Fireworks but after the oddness that passed for an opening act, the faithful, but not overly, strains of 'Ace Of Spades', 'Love Gun' and so on, seemed to somehow draw the Hard Rocking masses off the cold streets of Glasgow just in time for the main event – kudos to them.

Known for his time in the Sensational Alex Harvey Band and the Michael Schenker Group, bassist Chris Glen wanted to wish us all a Merry Christmas, or as legendary Glasgow Hard Rock DJ Tom Russell put it in his stage introduction, "Merry Christmas Motherfuckers!" Fair to suggest it set the tone for the night.

SAHB classics 'Boston Tea Party', 'Faith Healer', 'Framed', 'Gamblin' Bar Room Blues' and 'Tomahawk Kid' saw Peter Higgins, Charlie Moffat and Chris Thomson take turns behind the mic and they did Alex Harvey proud in the process. However the arrival of Vengeance main-man Leon Goewie for storming versions of MSG's 'Armed And Ready' and 'Let Sleeping Dogs Lie' lit the touch-paper of madness. The top-hatted singer careened around the tight stage like a loon and honestly, I'd pay to watch this mad Dutchman perform in an empty room! Suddenly the attentive crowd were in party mood, they punched the air, danced at the back and sang every word. A couple of AC/DC numbers raised the spirits higher, 'Thunderstruck' and 'Let There Be Rock' loosened Goewie's grip on reality further before Higgins was back out for SAHB's 'Gang Bang'. I don't think I'll ever forget a parka jacket clad, grey haired lady in demure spectacles grabbing the mic from Higgins to belt out the words "gang bang, gang bang, we're going to a gang bang"!

Huge credit to Glen as he grinned away and orchestrated the ever evolving line-up on stage, he counted his band mates in and nodded to them when the tempo changes or solos were due. Drummer Davie Halley (ex-Glasgow), who played with broken ribs, complimented Glen's superb bass work to perfection. Special mention also to violinist Wes Bird who appeared for 'Next' and guitarist Julian Hutson Saxby (Katy Lied) who was superb regardless of whether he was required to hammer out the Hard Rock of AC/DC and MSG or keep it refined for the SAHB numbers.

Finally Goewie returned, flat cap on and pom-poms in hand for a cover of UFO's 'Doctor Doctor', before the whole entourage, and everyone in the packed, sweaty room, belted out the SAHB staple 'Delilah'. Glen left the stage rightly triumphant and delighted and he promised to be back, same time, same place next year. Count me in; this was the best motherfucking Christmas party I've ever been to!

Steven Reid

FISH
Glasgow: ABC
21 December 2014

It had been a glorious but hard year for Fish; his recent album 'A Feast Of Consequences' rightly lauded as one of the best of his career. However, health issues for the singer and members of his band have resulted in a series of costly cancelled shows across the U.K. and Europe. Add in long time band members Frank Usher and Foss Patterson moving on and, as ever, even when things are going well for the big Scot, things were still going wrong. Not that you'd have known from this tour closing show in a packed ABC in Glasgow. Although bad luck continued to beset the band recently; keyboard player John Beck (also It Bites) hobbled on stage with the aid of a crutch (having visited A&E earlier that day) before Fish, having placed his foot on the monitor, admitted he was wearing orthopaedic shoes. That all said, Beck has fitted into this latest Fish line-up like a glove; his understated, faithful style perfect for the old, new and very old numbers on display and he expertly weaved through guitarist Robin Boult's confident fret-work all evening.

The bulk of the opening half of the set was newer material, 'Perfume River' an atmospheric introduction, 'Feast Of Consequences' built the mood further, before the slightly older 'Manchmal' and 'Arc Of The Curve' ensured the crowd was fully onside. Always known for his on-stage banter and interaction, the big man hushed the crowd to introduce the main part of the set; the five song 'High Wood Suite' which was a result of a coincidence strewn visit to WWI battlefields. A musical statement of force and poignancy, this passionate performance was heightened superbly by sobering imagery that was projected on the backdrop, which helped create a genuinely moving visual and aural experience.

With his well-documented bronchitis issues in mind, Fish's voice stood up amazingly well as he launched, with gusto, into the night's first Marillion selection, 'Slainte Mhath', before another spoken intro, where he commented on the confused, harsh world we live in before the singer stepped into the crowd. He slow walked through the throng and a series of considered handshakes had a far greater effect than those front-men who want to rush around a hall, shoving a microphone into random faces; especially when backed by the lyrics of 'Vigil', which extolled the virtues of the power people possess to create change. Cleverly, the energetic 'Big Wedge' signalled the rush for the line before 'Heart Of Lothian' closed the main set with another phenomenal Marillion classic. However, even that didn't prepare anyone for the stunning, vintage rendition of 'Incubus' which followed. 'Blind To The Beautiful' and 'The Company' brought the house down as Fish waved goodbye to the ups and downs 2014 had brought.

On this form, talk of retirement seems unthinkable and yet that's what Fish says his near future holds. Performances like this then are a privilege to witness and should be cherished now and for years to come.

Steven Reid

AXXIS
Germany: Zeche Bochum
28 December 2014

Most bands would sell their soul for the chance to celebrate a double-digit anniversary; one can only

imagine what they'd give up for a quarter of a century milestone. But if you want to know, just ask German Hard Rockers Axxis who recently commemorated their 25th Anniversary with a sold-out gig at the Zeche Bochum. The show lasted just under four hours and was made up of an impressive thirty-four song set that constituted a time-travelling trip through Axxis' history (aided by multiple guests).

Axxis opened up with 'Kingdom Of The Night II' and followed it with a well selected mixture from the early days, such as 'Little War', alongside more recent offerings like 'Hall Of Fame' and '21 Crosses'. The guests emerged early with three different appearances in a row towards the end of the first half. Former drummer Andre Hilgers took par in 'Tales Of Glory Island' whilst Victor Smolski (Rage) added extra six-string power to 'Trash In Tibet'. The last of this trio saw percussionist extraordinaire Pitti Hecht (Scorpions) take part in a rather impressive drum solo section with Dirk Brand. He stayed for 'Heaven In Paradise' and 'Angel Of Death' which saw the interval arrive.

During it, reality police-officer Thomas "Harry" Weinkauf assisted with a quiz where three fans were bought up and answered questions about the band, the winner took home a year-long Axxis pass. The band then returned for the show's acoustic segment which included a rare live outing for 'Julia', 'Another Day' and 'Ships Are Sailing'. Two younger crowd members where then invited onto stage where they helped add a drum beat to 'Touch The Rainbow' before the rest of the band took to various skins for another drum piece.

It was then back to the main show with 'We Are The World' where Vassilios "Lucky" and Ioannis "Janni" Maniatopoulos (Tri State Corner) also joined Axxis on stage. The fourteen song second half contained another mixture of old and new which included 'Little Princess', 'Venom' and 'Living In A World' as well as more guests. Jeanette Scherff (Dawn Of Destiny) contributed some fine female vocals to 'Take My Hand' and 'Dance With Dead', Hannes Braun (Kissin' Dynamite) gave a whirlwind performance during 'Heavy Rain' and my personal highlight was when Doro Pesch arrived and supplied her superb vocals to 'Stay Don't Leave Me'. But for long term Axxis fans, I suspect the peak moment was when founding bassist Werner Kleinhaus took part in the penultimate song 'Kingdom Of The Night'. The whole event came to its crescendo with everyone back on stage for 'Nanana Kissin'.

This was an utterly fabulous evening all round; the lighting was superb, the sound fantastic and it was clearly an emotional night for everyone involved. The band themselves played a blinder throughout but I must give special mention to Bernhard Weiss who looked like he was having a blast from to start to finish. I feel privileged and lucky to have been able to be present at such a special occasion.

Dave Scott

SABATON, DELAIN, BATTLE BEAST
Germany: Oberhausen, Turbinenhalle
06 January 2015

The first gig of 2015 was a mouth-watering prospect. The headliners were Sweden's Heavy Metal maestros Sabaton who I was keen to see, but I'd be lying if I didn't admit that it was the two openers that truly had my attention, given they were two of my favourite Female-Fronted acts; first up was Finnish Power Metallers Battle Beast with my top Symphonic band Delain sandwiched in between.

There appeared a delay to the start but eventually a PA-played intro began proceedings and a sea of hands went up as everyone clapped along. BB's short set was opened with 'Far, Far Away' and it was clear they were in good form, especially vocalist Noora

Louhimo who let fly a couple of serious roars. The light show was one of the more impressive I have seen at a venue of this size and the sound was equally good bar a slight echo at the rear. The set consisted of a further five songs with the two highlights being the superb, infectious, eighties-tastic 'Touch In The Night' and the lively set closer 'Out Of Control'. I thought they played a fine set, albeit not quite as mind-blowing as in London last time. The crowd response (from my vantage point) wasn't quite as enthusiastic as I would've expected, however, I'm reliably informed it was far more favourable at the front.

Having missed Delain's swift U.K. visit in November, I had been seriously looking forward to seeing one of my top three favourite bands again. Sadly, based on the almost non-existent crowd reaction that I witnessed tonight, there were very few present who felt the same. I have personally seen Delain put on some sensational performances as well as heard (and read) from others how they have done the same elsewhere and fired up many varied and different crowds time after time. But there was little reaction to their eight song performance this evening and despite a set that included the catchy selections of 'Get The Devil Out Of Me' and 'Army Of Dolls' early on, and one backed up by continued impressive lighting and improved sound, the crowd remained all but unmoved around me. The exceedingly muted response to the usually joy-inducing 'The Gathering' and the utterly infectious 'We Are The Others' left me all but speechless. Whilst it wasn't in any way a bad show from Delain (I personally thoroughly enjoyed their actual performance), there appeared a slight lack of the usual delight and vibrancy in their presentation; for a band who always feed on the crowd's energy... sadly this wasn't really surprising. Given the partisan nature of the t-shirts that were on display, this may have been either the wrong crowd or even simply the wrong tour for them. Either way I look forward to seeing Delain again as soon as possible doing what they do best, whipping the crowd into a frenzy and putting on a stunning display whilst doing so.

Given that virtually every single person that attended tonight was decked in a Sabaton t-shirt, it will come as no surprise that the crowd went utterly wild from the first moment 'The Final Countdown' poured out the PA to signal the start of their set. I have seen some impressive crowd reactions in my time but they really did give everything during Sabaton's one hour, forty minute (seventeen song) set that was full of surprises and treats. For example early on the audience were given the chance to choose (through cheers) whether 'Gott Mit Uns' was performed in English or Swedish (the latter prevailed) then directly afterwards they selected 'Soldier Of 3 Armies' instead of 'Smoking Snakes'. It was an unusual tactic that I haven't seen used so often in one show before. There was more of the same later on when the audience were given another choice and opted for 'The Lion From The North' in English rather than '1648' in Swedish. There was main set was bought to its conclusion with further audience input; 'Swedish Pagans' was played after being shouted the loudest by audience members and it preceded 'Uprising' and 'White Death'. These were supposed to be an either/or audience choice but instead they insisted and were then granted both. After the usual leave and return, Sabaton finished off with a three song encore of 'Night Witches', 'Primo Victoria' and 'Metal Crue' that was followed by a thunderous cheer at the end that was very well deserved.

Despite my personal disappointment regarding Delain's reception, this was a truly fantastic show from Sabaton. They know not only how to play and put on a great show musically and visually, but also how to work a crowd with banter and chat between almost every song. In the end I had a great time tonight and I wouldn't hesitate to either recommend or go and see Sabaton again myself.

Dave Scott

DIESEL
Bolton: The Railway Tavern
17 January 2015

There was a chill in the air and snow on the ground tonight, but as usual there was a warm welcome at The Railway, not least because Diesel were here. For those who don't know, Diesel are a band put together by FM's Jim Kirkpatrick and Robert Hart, probably best know for his time in Bad Company and currently Manfred Mann's Earthband. The line-up is completed by Robert's fellow MME drummer Jimmy Copley and bassist Pat Davey, most recently known for his work with the reunited melodic rockers Seven. Last year's 'Into The Fire' album was a well received album of melodic AOR with Rock edge from the Bad Company and Blues influences of Hart and Kirkpatrick. Tonight, with the same four-piece band, the songs were stripped of the big production and keyboard harmonies to leave a rawer, Hard Rocking sound and they stood up well to the treatment.

'Into The Fire' set the tone immediately, as bass and drums drove the up-tempo pace of the song, Hart's vocals were sharp and clear with enough of an edge to provide some real power to the sound. Kirkpatrick kicked out the riffs in a manner that FM doesn't always allow and this showed what a fine Rock and Blues guitarist he is. There were a couple more tracks from the album before the first diversion of the night, which was a cover of Free's 'Mr Big'.

The performance was easy going with the emphasis on enjoyment, both on and off stage. Hart joked and had plenty of banter with the audience and as Kirkpatrick commented at the time – 'it's fun just to be on a different stage, playing different songs with different musicians'. It was soon back to their own songs with 'Love Under Cover' and 'Skin And Bone' before they opted for a sing-along version of 'Feels Like Makin' Love'. Hart shouldered an acoustic guitar for a solo rendition of the MME classic 'Davey's On The Road Again' and a similarly stripped down version of their own 'Coming Home'. Another Free song, 'The Stealer', brought the band back to the stage followed by a high energy rendition of my own Diesel favourite 'The Long Way Home'. As an encore Kirkpatrick showed off his Blues roots with 'Good Morning Little Schoolgirl' which gave Copley and Davey the chance to shine with their own solo spots.

The band went down a storm tonight. Diesel won't affect the day jobs, but tonight was the epitome of talented musicians letting loose for a night of straight-forward, good-time Rock 'n' Roll. Other commitments permitting there may well be more from Diesel and, with a great time had by all, why ever not?

Ian Parry

MULTIMEDIA

JEFF BECK – 'LIVE IN TOKYO' *(Eagle Vision)* ROCK

As a big fan of instrumental guitar music and of Jeff Beck's playing in particular, his 2008 'Live At Ronnie Scott's' became the benchmark against which all other similar DVD's were judged. The personalities, the performance, the special guests and the club ambience all came together to make something that still hasn't been beaten, so much so that I found his subsequent 'Rock And Roll Party' show pretty unwatchable. 'Live In Tokyo' features a lot of the same music as the Scott's show, this time on a big stage in a huge hall, and whilst his previous band of keyboard player Jason Rebello, bassist Tal Wilkenfeld and drum legend Vinnie Colaiuta are no longer with him, their replacements are pretty special too.

There is a clarity to Beck's live sound that I haven't heard anywhere else and that comes over on this recording as the short, sharp 'Loaded' gets things underway. As usual Beck has chosen a simple piece to get everybody warmed up and follows it with his version of Jimi Hendrix's 'Little Wing' which is warmly received by a Japanese crowd who surprisingly shout things out during the gaps between songs.

Beck begins to really shine during 'Hammerhead' but it takes a while to get used to the keyboard parts being played on a guitar synth by the excellent Nicolas Meier, who also shows his prowess on the flamenco guitar and during his own composition 'Yemin'. Beck is jaw-droppingly note perfect on the classics 'Stratus', 'Where Were You' and 'The Pump' as well as during the emotional pairing of 'Goodbye Pork Pie Hat' and 'Brush With The Blues'.

Drummer Jonathan Joseph and bassist Rhonda Smith are both finds and shine on 'Led Boots' and 'Big Block', but it's Beck's subtlety that makes potentially corny solo versions of 'Danny Boy' and 'Corpus Christi' immensely enjoyable. His short re-working of The Beatles 'A Day In The Life' shows what a great tune it is and the set comes to a close with a riotous 'Rollin' And Tumblin'', with encores of the inevitable 'Cause We Ended As Lovers' and the only vocal track of the evening, the rhythm section co-vocal on the Funky 'Why Give It Away'.

There isn't much in the way of extras other than the band talking about each other and a trip through the set-list and why each song was included, but the ninety minute concert is enough to show why Jeff Beck is a master of control, technique and musicality. 'Live In Tokyo' is a must for fans of the man and his music.

Phil Ashcroft

ROMEO'S DAUGHTER – 'ALIVE' *(RD Enterprises/Cargo)* MELODIC ROCK

I have a long history when it comes to British AOR veterans Romeo's Daughter, with fond memories of gigs some twenty odd years ago and also of drooling over Leigh Matty, their talented and rather sexy vocalist. They never reached the heights that were expected after they were bunged together with producer supreme Mutt Lange for their debut. I have to admit, I was personally delighted when they recently came out of retirement to do a few shows and then release a surprisingly high quality album on top.

Just over a year ago now, they recorded their gig at The Guildhall Theatre in Derby for posterity and (hopefully) profit, and the result is this rather spiffy DVD and CD combo that seems to have been slipped under the review radar, which is a shame. I say a shame because anyone who has fond memories of the band will love 'Alive'.

It doesn't possess any sort of massive production and the crowd are not the most mental you will ever have seen (although they get better as the gig goes on), but the music and overall quality are both first class. Seventeen tracks are aired (with two surprising omissions being the singles 'Don't Break My Heart' and 'Attracted To The Animal'), with a track listing that runs from 'Heaven In The Back Seat' through to recent releases 'Trippin'' (an excellent opener and my favourite from the last album) and 'Alive'. There's not a single filler in sight (or sound) and the band are tight as you could ever want.

I do like a good live DVD and this one is a keeper for sure. It sounds absolutely brilliant for starters and, as usual, the band look like they're having fun. Once the audience get warmed up (well, it was October) and join them, the atmosphere is a great one.

The mark of a good live album/DVD is that when you listen/watch it, you wish you had been there and 'Alive' hits that mark without any problems, so go and buy it.

Alan Holloway

UFO – 'SHOWTIME' *(Steamhammer/SPV)* HARD ROCK

Newly released on Blu-Ray, 'Showtime' is a re-issue of the live DVD that was first released back in 2005 and taken from UFO's first tour where Vinnie Moore had taken over the guitar duties from Michael Schenker.

Recorded in Germany, it also features Jason Bonham and Pete Way along with Paul Raymond and of course Phil Mogg. Whilst the performances are strong enough all round, it just seems to lack the warmth and energy I expect from a UFO gig. The sound is certainly clean and vibrant, but perhaps just a bit too clinical compared to other UFO shows that are out there. What you do get though is an interesting selection of tracks from the, then current, 'You Are Here' album and eleven of the sixteen tracks that also appeared on the classic 'Strangers In The Night' in a "greatest hits" type set.

Far more interesting is the bonus material; in particular, a selection of songs recorded live in the studio including versions of 'Try Me', 'Love To Love' and 'Profession Of Violence' recorded with a string quartet. Not surprisingly there's a couple of typically bizarre UFO images – Raymond playing a grand piano, resplendent with Liberace style candelabra… and a coffee mug. Whilst the string quartet have their pages of complex sheet music, Way has an A4 sheet with "C, B, C, B, A, F" scrawled in thick marker pen.

There are interviews and documentaries to provide further interest, but with no additional material from the original DVD package, it's hardly an essential re-issue if I am honest.

Ian Parry

A SUN HILL PRODUCTION

ON TOUR IN MARCH

AND

7th London Underworld, 8th Grimsby Yardbirds,
10th Bolton Railway, 11th Sutton-In-Ashfield Diamond

NEW ALBUM OUT APRIL

NEW ALBUM OUT MARCH 2nd

10th London Underworld, 11th Grimsby Yardbirds,
15th Swansea Static, 17th Wigan Old Courts, 18th York Fibbers

CARGO RECORDS

Serious Black? Seriously? I can't be the first one who looked at the band name and thought it was a typo or a joke band, but it's not – Serious Black are a proper band and as such are deadly… well… serious. One listen to their debut album 'As Daylight Breaks' and any fears are immediately dispelled. This is Power Metal the way it was meant to be, helped by the fact that the band features one of its veterans, Ex Helloween six stringer Roland Grapow, as well as the soaring voice of Urban breed (Tad Morose). Masterminding the whole thing, however, is bassist Mario Lochert, and Alan Holloway was invited to put a few questions to him regarding his new band.

Can you talk us through the formation of the band?

Sure. I had wanted to form a real working band with nothing but experienced musicians for a very long time and I decided to actually go ahead and do something about that when I was backstage somewhere in Spain two years ago, talking to Roland (Grapow). I got him sold on the idea and felt I was off to a good start. The next person to sign up was Thomen (Stauch). I kept on building step by step until we had every position but one filled. But then I purposefully held off as we wanted to get a feel for where things were heading. After the first writing (and jamming) session in Munich we sat down and talked singers. Thomen suggested Urban, we had a listen and that settled it.

Urban breed has a very traditional high register Power Metal voice. It must be a bonus to have such an experienced and talented Power Metal guitarist in the group.

That's a given. I can't say much more about it. It seems so obvious to me, you know.

What made you choose the name that you did?

We had a list of possible names and there were some great contenders, but as both Thomen and I are a fans of Harry Potter we couldn't resist this little poke at the name.

Researching is a funny thing. Were you aware that Google was utterly convinced that I was looking for the Harry Potter character Sirius Black and when it did finally accept I wanted Serious Black were you aware that there is a New York underground Hip Hop artist also called Serious Black?

Ah, yes, Urban told us about these things actually. He's not exactly a fan of the name. He tried to convince us that having Urban breed in Serious Black was nothing but trouble. Hahaha...

He is such a difference to your Emergency Gate singer, who is a bona fide shouter. Do you have a preference for either style?

Well, Serious Black is Power Metal and it will never become a Melodic Death Core group. Power Metal was my first love in music and I love this music still today. Don't misunderstand me, with Emergency Gate it's great to put the aggression into the crowd, to see and feel the mosh-pits. But in comparison with Serious Black, you feel the music. That's the difference. To me, it wouldn't work swapping vocal styles between those bands. Urban is perfect for us and Mattias is the right choice for Emergency Gate. For my own private listening moments I prefer the more melodic approach but please remember that that is not right for Emergency Gate.

The debut album is a fine piece of work, I take it you are all happy with the results of your collaboration?

Very happy indeed. We're off to a flying start with this. Trying out the material live as we are now (with HammerFall) we're finding that we've got it right in every way. We really have room for all of us in this.

Who was responsible for the song-writing?

That would be anyone in the band that brings in an idea, so all of us. This gives us a bit of diversity.

Are there any important messages in the lyrics that you hope people will pick up on?

I think the strongest connecting thread would probably be that you should take a good hard look at yourself and live accordingly.

The modern world makes it much easier for fans to investigate lyrical concepts. For example, if I had listened to 'Akhenaton' twenty years ago I would not know he was an Egyptian pharaoh!

Oh, absolutely. Not only that, it also facilitates the forming of a band with members from all over the world. We can stay in touch every day throughout the whole process; before and after it and not just when in the studio.

Which tracks have emerged as your personal favourites?

That would be 'Sealing My Fate', 'Listen To The Storm' and bonus track 'Someone Else's Life'. There might be a common denominator here, I'm not sure?

It wasn't that long between the initial idea for the band and the album. How did you manage to pull it off so fast?

That was really only possible because of the collective experience in the band. With such a seasoned troupe we knew what needed to be done and didn't waste any time.

The next step is taking the band on the road, which is happening right now as you mentioned; is this difficult to organize around the different work schedules?

It's not an easy task but we are all very enthusiastic about what we have here so, frankly, we push all other things aside for Serious Black.

How would you describe the music of Serious Black to someone totally new to the scene?

Our music is pretty much defined by our various pasts. This puts us somewhere on the Power Metal scale but don't let that scare you off if this isn't normally your cup of tea. There is quite a bit of variety in here.

THE DATSUNS

The Datsuns have recently released their sixth album of fuzz-induced 70s style Rock with very little of the fanfare associated with their 2002 debut album, which saw the band garnering a great deal of success. They could be heard regularly on the John Peel show on Radio One, toured Europe and were labelled "The future of Rock" by the British music press; a moniker that ultimately became a millstone around their neck.

Mike Newdeck caught up with guitarist Christian Livingstone to talk about the new album and how things are working for the band now…

Phone interviews usually involve a transatlantic call to some far off backwater of the USA, but for multinational band The Datsuns this means a phone call to Crystal Palace, South London to speak to lead guitarist Livingstone who has been living there for quite a long time now.

"I'm the only one left here now," he jokes. "One of us is in Stockholm and the other two in New Zealand but at opposite ends of the country. Let's make it as difficult as we can for ourselves.

At least it's not the mid 80s; we would have had to have sent tapes to each other then and it would take a month to get to the other side of the world. It wouldn't work."

The band's last album 'Death, Rattle and Boogie' was released a couple of years ago but the band members haven't been sat around doing nothing.

"Well we've done a little bit of touring but we've reached the age where there are families and children involved and we've had to plan around that really. Obviously we then got together to write and record the new record. Dolph (Le Borst) is in another band and so he had to juggle his commitments even more. We're all in our mid to late thirties, and I've actually just turned forty, so there are big life changes for us compared to when we first started out. We used to tour endlessly and now we don't. We left it a bit later in life to have families and it's a hell of a change; you can't tour for a year non-stop without seeing your kids, it wouldn't work out, and the logistics have changed. It's more difficult to be a Rock band in 2014 as well. Touring is difficult because band members have to travel half way round the planet just to meet up with each other and the climate for Rock music isn't great. I mean we're not on the television or anything, so money is an issue just for existing as a band. It's difficult to get anyone interested in helping to put a record out because the thought is that no one will buy it so what's in it for me?"

Although the band members are scattered over the surface of the Earth, The Datsuns are still standard bearers for Rock in their home country New Zealand. Livingstone thinks it's weird.

"I'm pretty detached form that to be honest," he admits. "I've been living in England for over a decade and I only go there to play a show so I don't really see what it's like with respect to popularity. We are one of the very few Rock bands in the country because it's Reggae and Dubstep that rules there at the moment. Rock bands are rare."

The latest album 'Deep Sleep' was partly recorded in New Zealand.

"We did half there and half in Sweden," Livingstone explains. "We went over to New Zealand for some shows and we had to do things very quickly because we only had a few days. In total we wrote and recorded this album in about ten days finishing up a little bit in Sweden. It was all very 70s style; you know, a record a year and tour and then somewhere in between bang out another record in the studio."

The band are very much a do it yourself project and that includes the production and there's certainly no big name producer involved.

"It's all done ourselves. We're pretty stubborn and argue amongst ourselves enough without involving someone else. It's also another person to pay and we know what we're doing, having done four of the six ourselves. Of course one of our records involved John Paul Jones producing and on the last one Nick Anderson was involved so we have been there. We did talk about where we wanted to go with it before we wrote and recorded and we've never done that before. I suppose it saved time knowing we didn't have long to do it all. We actually wrote a manifesto and one of the criteria was that the album had to sound like it was recorded between 1969 and 1973 otherwise it wouldn't be us. We used three mics on the drum kit and not thirty like today and we recorded everything really simply, old school style."

Clearly 'Deep Sleep' has lost the commercial edge of the debut, maybe that's the price of progress? Livingstone gives his thoughts.

"Well to be honest we wouldn't know how to be commercial if we tried. We didn't think like that on the debut and we don't think like that now. With the debut I think we were lucky to fall into a brief window in time where that kind of music was more popular; it was purely by chance. The songs were written by a bunch of guys in New Zealand who never, ever thought that they would move away or make any sort of success at all, it was really for us."

It sounds like you feel that there's been no discernible change in your music then?

"Well it's very difficult to judge from the

inside. Other people probably see it but I'm not objective enough to recognise it. I see differences between individual songs as in say the key that they're in but I'm not good at charting progression."

No doubt that the fuzzed up Sabbath style guitar sound remains intact.

"Well we did go for a fuzzier sound this time around," Livingstone explains. "That in itself gives a more 70s vibe and that was intentional. I actually sell fuzz pedals for a living here in London for my own company called Magnetic, so I'm tuned into the sound that we could achieve. The sound is somewhere between Sabbath and Blue Cheer."

The Indie bands seem to have more control over output. Is label control a thing of the past?

"We have witnessed control," Livingstone explains, "but we avoided a lot of it because we licensed our music to labels and managed to retain creative control. Sometimes though they have tried to get us to do stuff we didn't want to do but I think it's overstated because some great people are there to advise and make sure the record sounds great. It's not all evil."

When the debut came out The Datsuns were hailed as the future of Rock. Does Livingstone think it's worked out like that?

"It was kind of weird," he remembers. "A lot of people were saying some very silly things about us. No one band is the future of Rock and certainly not us, we were very wary about it all. It was about making music for fun. If everyone hated us – which I suppose they did when some of our albums were criticized – we'd still be doing it so it's fairly irrelevant. Our success was with the first and second albums and mainly in the UK. That subsided when the UK lost a bit of interest in Rock music and we ended up as poster boys for the failure of Garage Rock…we were shit! The fact that we were more like Deep Purple than Garage Rock was missed."

The Datsuns have more or less been irrelevant in the States, as Livingstone explains.

"It was because our success lay in Europe and that's where we spent our time. It's pretty much like that nowadays too. We played there a few times but to break it you really have to put your whole world into it at the expense of everything else. You have to go and live there really. We chose Europe, Japan and Australia because we had support there. In the States we were on our own, it would never work."

The Datsuns new album 'Deep Sleep' is out now and will be backed up by a European tour starting at the end of October.

Gandalf's Fist

UK Progressive Rock outfit Gandalf's Fist have been on the go since 2005, however over the last couple of years the band's profile has suddenly and significantly shot up; both 2013's 'A Day In The Life Of A Universal Wanderer' and last year's 'A Forest Of Fey' being acclaimed by critics and adored by fans. So the first question Firework's Steven Reid put to guitarist, singer, song-writer Dean Marsh and newly recruited drummer Stefan Hepe was where has this up-turn in fortune comes from?

Dean: Initially I thought it was our immense sex appeal but I now tend to think it's generally a culminated effect – as an independent outfit we very much rely on word of mouth as our marketing tool, which in this day and age of course, social media can play a very big part in. We can't compete with bands who have a massive marketing budget, because ours consists of the pennies we can scramble together from underneath the couch. But what we can do is put our stuff out there, and surely, year on year the cluster of fans grows. Also I think we've really hit on "our sound" on the last two records and I'm over the moon people are wanting to delve into our very strange world with us!

'A Day In The Life Of A Universal Wanderer' (does an album title get more Prog than that!?) received rave reviews and far wider coverage than your previous albums. Was the quick-fire return with 'A Forest Of Fey' (does an album title get more Prog than that?!) a result of you wanting to keep and then build on that momentum?

Stefan: At first there weren't any plans for an album in 2014. When I was told I was a full member of the band, Dean just said "don't expect any new material in 2014, as I have to concentrate on some other projects". But then, all of a sudden, he came up with the first demo, really excited about it. And work on the album began despite our plans to NOT release one in 2014…

Dean: …I had no plans at all. When I've got the songs we'll make an album and there's very little other logic applied than that. One day last February I was taking a walk through the forest down the road from my house and the title track sort of composed itself in its entirety then and there. That begun the momentum of starting the record.

However, while still undeniably Gandalf's Fistian in approach, the two albums vary (rather satisfyingly) quite significantly from each other. Was that a conscious decision?

Dean: In a sense. I really enjoyed exploring the marauding Space Rock vibe of 'Universal Wanderer', but after that album was done and dusted Luke and myself had the discussion that it would be really great to get back to a 'folky' sound we'd played around with back on our 'Songs of the Solway' EP. Once we'd developed the story it was fairly obvious the direction the record should take.

Although the biggest change between albums for Gandalf's Fist has been the addition of Stefan on drums and bassist Chris Ewan. Was it a difficult decision to move from a duo to a four-piece?

Dean: Not at all. It's actually beneficial to me to have more musicians in the band as I can bounce ideas off them and get their slant on what we're doing. I now have the luxury of delegating bass and drum parts to specialists!

Will Stefan and Chris be part of the songwriting process for future albums?

Stefan: Actually, we both are already. It all depends on what I get from Dean to work on – sometimes he has a drum-rhythm in mind which is on the demo, which I try to mimic as well as possible, sometimes I have absolute freedom about what I do to the songs. At times we even discuss drum-fills as well.

Dean: Chris has a couple of songs already stowed away that we couldn't fit onto the last record and we exchanged ideas quite freely on the last record! I'm looking forward to seeing what everyone comes up with next time round!

Does it almost feel like a completely new beginning for the band, what with the line-up and vision quite far removed from that of the time of the debut album 'The Master And The Monkey'?

Dean: In some respects but the band has evolved with each album we've done. It's no coincidence that all of our albums have a different sound and vibe. What is exciting for me, especially with the success of the last album, is that we now have our own little fan base… it puts the pressure on us to come up with the goods and try and make our next album even better!

Stefan, how easy has it been for you and Chris to adapt to joining a well established outfit like Gandalf's Fist who already had their own "modus operandi" as a duo?

Stefan: Well, I was the complete "stranger" in the band, as Luke and Dean already knew Chris for some time. But I really didn't feel like that at all, they made me feel at home right from the start. For the Planet Rockstock Gig I had to learn some songs, but as I was already a fan of the band, it wasn't that hard to get the basics – and during rehearsals we re-wrote quite a lot of them to make them easier to play live on stage. Some songs we changed so much, you wouldn't recognise them at first.

The album features a whole host of well known guests. How did you manage to get such well respected names in the Prog world, such as Troy Donockley, Clive Nolan, John Mitchell, Dave Oberlé and Matt Stevens to contribute?

Dean: Let's be clear; each one of these are immensely cool guys! I had an almost "wish list" of people I'd love to work with on this album and was over the moon with the amount of people who were willing to jump on board the project! I think it's a testament to the album and the quality of the songs that our guest musicians wanted to be involved and couldn't be happier with their contributions. The ball got rolling initially when I approached Troy to have some of his trademark "low whistles" on this record – it's got a unique melancholic quality all of its own so I knew it would be perfect for 'Forest of Fey'. We traded stories about growing up in West Cumbria and things slotted into place from there. I've made some good friends working on this album and hopefully that continues in the future!

And is it a little surreal to have such respected figures performing and recording ideas which you have written for them?

Stefan: Well, for me it was absolutely fabulous to have, say, Dave Oberlé playing and singing with us, as I have the complete Gryphon discography on my shelves. If you would've told me that would happen back in 2009, I would've called you completely nuts, for sure.

Dean: Free reign was the key here. I wanted these guys on board for their creativity not just to play what I'd jotted down. Obviously Dave and John were singing my lyrics but I didn't want to be prescriptive; it was far more important for everyone to bring their own ideas to this Jam and I think the results speak for themselves!

'A Forest Of Fey', as most of GF's albums are, is a conceptual piece…

Dean: The idea I had was to have a modern-day take on the classic fairy-tale of being lost in an enchanted forest. Our main character, a young girl, finds herself lost within a psychedelic wilderness were there's a whole bunch of unusual characters. You should hear some of the tracks that didn't make the cut – there was even one about an anthropomorphised weasel named Cornelius Haddington, who enjoyed making hats and dating Peacock-people. It soon transpires that the only way to escape this crazy place is to best everyone in combat in the king's tournament. Our Lass finds herself up in arms against a court-jester and soon finds herself with a very difficult decision to make! The whole story is allegorical really, it's about the loss of innocence in an age of people being saturated by mass media's representation of the world from a very young age. Penelope Lively does it better than anyone in her short story 'The Darkness Out There'; it's a similar kind of thing… we all have a progression from our 'childhood ghosts' to a realisation that there are some truly terrifying things that exist in the 'real' world.

Interestingly, with Luke being the band's main lyric writer and singer, much of 'A Forest Of Fey' is actually sung by the wonderful Melissa Hollick. Obviously it's a female character we are following throughout this story, however I still think it was a very magnanimous decision by Luke not to sing all, or at least more, of the lead vocals on the album. How was that decision made?

Dean: That's interestingly a presumption a lot of people make. In the past I've been responsible for a lot of vocals that people assume to be Luke singing… Usually we try and split things 50/50 but that's not always possible when I'm embroiled in recording. It's a lot easier for me to do the singing because I have the studio and can write the songs and just get on with it in my own time. Then Luke will come in and do his stuff! In terms of songwriting I'll usually say to Luke: "here's a chorus and a verse, give me two more verses like this", but it really works the best when we sit down with a bottle of scotch by a microphone and bounce ideas off each other… just two good mates coming up with songs. It's a great laugh and actually my favourite part of being in Gandalf's Fist. Melissa did such a terrific job on our last album as a guest, that I simply knew that she needed to feature more this time round. The fact that we have a female lead character meant that there was a common thread running throughout the record, which I thought was vitally important. She's a fantastic singer and has a haunting voice that just works so well with the theme of this album!

I'd also like to mention Alicia Arthur, who does a wonderful, albeit brief, job of adding "voice acting" to the beginning and end of the album.

Dean: Alicia is my Fiancée! She's a Primary school teacher so she knows how to play that particular part on the album very well! She put up with me being holed up for days on end recording this album so I was thrilled she could be a part of it. She did a brilliant job and I'm chuffed that she's getting some plaudits!

Gandalf's Fist are still recording and releasing albums, pretty much, under your own steam. Has there never been a temptation to seek out that mythical "record deal"?

Dean: We've explored all different kinds of avenues, but really we're yet to come across a deal where we thought they could offer something that we couldn't do ourselves! It's a new age in terms of producing music and it might well be we're starting to prove that the holy grail of being "signed" might be a thing of the past. But who can say? When someone comes along and offers to do something for the band I can't, I'll bite their hands off! I think we're yet to see the last change in the industry so I think there's quite a few big decisions, not just for us, but every recording artist might have to make!

How challenging is it doing everything from funding the albums to getting them released, without any outside backing?

Stefan: There's a bit of work and calculations, at least when it comes to funding it. You know, playing around with different types of options for a physical CD, like how many pages shall the booklet have, will it be a four-panel or a six-panel DigiPak, or a simple jewel-case and how many CDs do we produce in the initial batch. This is fun, but it can also knock you down at times, especially when you plan out for twelve booklet pages and you realise you can't afford more than six. On some occasions you think to yourself "Man, I wish someone would do all this for us", but the result always compensates for that.

Dean: It is a challenge, we all have full time jobs as well so we have to graft hard during the day to pay the bills and then work really hard in our spare time to make sure we're putting out the kind of music that makes GF what it is. We literally do everything in the production, it's tiring, yes but unfathomably rewarding to know that you've done it all off your own back!

Finnish band Stargazery have just released their excellent sophomore album 'Stars Aligned' which is a great slab of "old-school" classic Melodic Rock with a Metal edge. Mark Donnelly asked guitarist Pete Ahonen and vocalist Jari Tiura about the history of the band and the recording of the new album.

You have an interesting history that dates back to 2005 and the start of the band. For our readers could you give a quick history lesson in Stargazery?

Pete: Around 2005 I wrote this one song and I felt it didn't fit my other bands "roster". I just thought, why not make some demos and see how it goes. I knew Jari from his previous band Snakegod and that he had the pipes to sing the songs. Marco Sneck (keyboards) is from my hometown and we met in the bars here and there during the years, but we had never played together. Jukka Jokikokko was engineering our other band, Burning Point, at the studio and I knew he was also a skilful bassist. Our drummer at that time was a long-time friend Jarkko, but he realised pretty quickly that playing in the band wasn't really his thing. It was very natural choice to me to ask Jussi Ontero to join us and play the drums as he is one of the best musicians I know and very much my "right hand" nowadays. It took couple of years more than I wanted, mainly because all of us had commitments with the other bands, but, finally, in 2011 the debut 'Eye on the Sky' was released! And the song that started the whole thing….that was 'How Many Miles'.

The album has a very "old-school" Classic Rock vibe to it. Did you set out to make the album in that vein or is it something that was a natural progression as you went about working on the album?

Pete: Well, for the first time in my career, as a songwriter, I really thought where to go musically with Stargazery. There were some songs on the debut that were too "Power Metal" and that really sent out the wrong message. I wanted us to be more Hard Rock with a Metal edge and I think we accomplished that with 'Stars Aligned'. The songs came very natural, nothing forced, and I think you can hear that on the album. I am very happy with the outcome.

The album took almost four years to put together, which is another "old school" aspect compared to the more modern times where bands have albums out every other year. What factors lead to this length of time and what hurdles/difficulties, if any, did you have to overcome?

Jari: Well, we are "old school" and putting things together takes time. If I lived next to Pete we would do albums more often but I don't want to take any risk to lose the spark between Pete and me.

Pete: We also had contractual commitments and we had to finish the Burning Point album in between and obviously that took some time away from Stargazery. We will definitely pick up the pace and you won't have to wait four years for the next record.

Who are the principal songwriters for the band and how do you go about constructing your songs?

Pete: I wrote all the music, basically all the melodies and lyrics for nine of the tracks and Jari did the rest. I tend to write songs in a way that I have also the vocal melodies in my head and sometimes even more, drums, keyboard lines or bass lines. It was very natural for me, I hear the whole song in my head from the start. I've come to notice, however, my vision does not always work. Fortunately, we have more skilful players in the band and they come to the rescue if my vision is not working.

Jari: Pete does the songs. I do lyrics and melodies if it's suitable for the song or the other way round. When I'm dried out Pete does the rest of the lyrics. Basically it is easier for me just concentrate on the delivery and put some passion and feeling into the songs. I`m more a spiritual person, I need to feel it, the passion!

You released 'Dim The Halo' as the first single. What reasons drew you to choose that particular song?

Pete: We did a little poll with some of our friends and 'Dim The Halo' was mentioned lots of times when we asked what could be a perfect first single.

Lyrics are often an important aspect for any album. Can you select some of the songs and give our readers an insight into what themes or subjects they talk about?

Pete: 'Dim The Halo' is about people who sit on their high horse and talk about things they don't know anything about. They think that they are so "know it all" and that they are way better humans than the rest of us. 'Invisible' tells a little story about thousands of little children that are taken away from the parents or their parents are selling them to the criminals and no one will ever know who they are or where they are. They are totally invisible to the outside world.

Jari: 'Warriors Inn' is all about soldiers who spend their time in the battlefield while their leaders entertain themselves watching them. It is a brotherhood of humanity which unites these warriors on both sides. After battle they meet in 'Warriors Inn', the tavern that has no place for leaders.

The album has some strong production values, who was responsible for this part of the album and why did you turn to them?

Jari: Our drummer, Jussi Ontero, mixed the album. Jussi has a huge understanding of music, sounds, style and vision; his skills and vision for the sound are remarkable.

Your album has some fantastic artwork that is very much in keeping with the "old-school" style of the music. Again was this intentional or a natural decision and who produced it?

Jari: The "Ship In Space" theme was kind of an idea which I saw in a dream. After I remembered the dream in the morning I called the rest of the boys and they were like, "hmmm…. it`s a ship, Jari, you can do better." Okay, we had an idea about a ship in space. Well, who can deliver it? Luckily, Pete knew Felipe Machado, the artist who produced the cover art for our albums. He did just fantastic work. We shared some visions and Felipe delivered album art which turned out to be a sort of trademark for our band and now it's a significant part of whole Stargazery theme.

Aside from obviously promoting the album, what else does 2015 hold in store for Stargazery and its members?

Pete: We are putting finishing touches to Burning Point's new album as well as Ghost Machinery's new album. They will be released later this year. Also our project band Unations is searching for a label to release the debut and if all goes well, we will release that too, so, lots of music in the making. I love it!

SKARLETT RIOT

Skarlett Riot are a young female fronted Modern Rock band from the UK. Their debut 'Tear Me Down' received critical acclaim when released in 2013 and since then constant touring has honed the obvious talent that was displayed even further. Dave Bott put some questions to lead singer Chloe to find out about the new 'We Are The Brave' EP and her thoughts about the future.

The album 'Tear Me Down' was released in the first half of 2013 so can you give me a brief rundown about what the band has been up to since then?

We spent a lot of time working behind the scenes after touring the album in 2013. We've been writing, recording, making videos and doing photo-shoots ready for the EP release in February.

'Tear Me Down', as you may have expected, drew comparisons to the likes of Halestorm and Paramore but the new material sees Skarlett Riot forging more of an identity of their own, which I'm guessing is what you are ultimately aiming for?

Yeah the comparisons will always happen and to be compared to bands such as Halestorm and Paramore is a big compliment. I do think this new music gives us our own place in the Rock scene which is also important. For me, I want people to hear us on the radio and know straight away that it's Skarlett Riot.

The new CD contains just five tracks. Why release an EP as opposed to a full length album?

We wanted to choose the best recorded tracks that we've worked on over the past months and put a CD together with the best of our ability on there. Five kick-ass tracks has so much more impact than an album with 'fillers'. We want to tease people into what our second album will be about.

Who was responsible for writing the new material and when did the EP process begin?

We all worked together on the new tracks. Normally the process is me and Danny (guitar) bringing an initial, raw idea to the guys and then we will develop it from there. It only takes a small riff or vocal line to start the creativity off and before we know it we have a brand new stomping, kick-ass SR track! The EP process started around a year ago. We carried on writing after the album and picked the best tracks to go on the EP!

The tracks on the EP are all high energy workouts. Each is different but certainly "in your face". Do you have a band mantra when it comes to writing new songs?

We write music from the heart based on life experiences. I think we put aggression and power across well as a band because we each of us have different influences which I think come across in our music style. I write lyrics which I hope relate to everybody in different ways. The drive and energy of the tracks helps deliver the message in the words.

There are a large number of female fronted Modern Rock/Metal bands around at the moment but they seem to be based more in Europe and the USA. Why do you think that is? Does it relate to the state of the music industry in the UK?

I'm not sure. We always get told we would do well in Europe and America and hopefully one day we will have the funds to visit. I've seen a lot of venues and bands quitting lately which is sad. I feel times are a lot harder in the UK at the moment but hopefully that will turn around again in the future. I think our music is rarer in the UK but I definitely don't see that as a bad thing. We like to think we don't follow the crowd!

I've seen you play live a couple of times since the debut album was released but both times it was in a support band capacity. You only have thirty or forty minutes in front of an audience that may be there to primarily see another band, do you see that as something of a challenge?

Yeah when you headline, all those people are there to see you. It doesn't mean you don't put on as much of a show but the crowd know you and are already warmed to you. When supporting, you are there to basically warm someone else's crowd up and fill out the time before they come on stage. You don't have very long to win a crowd over and show what you've got. We go up there and give everything we have each night on tour. Whether people take to us or pass, we know we've done our very best. We got a great response on the Edguy tour last year!

Are there any bands you would really like to tour with?

Ooh many, because we all have different influences. For me personally I would have to say Halestorm, Shinedown, Alter Bridge, Bullet For My Valentine, Skindred, Marmozets, Nickelback, Asking Alexandria and Blackstone Cherry.

Having spoken to a number of female singers in recent years the general concensus seems to be that it is easier just being one of the guys, especially when on tour. As a good looking girl in a band with a bunch of guys do you tend to agree?

Yeah I see myself as one of the guys, you have to be. There's no division and it's easier to bro down! I don't feel I should be treated any differently with being a girl on tour, obviously I get up a lot earlier to do my make up, pick an outfit and backcomb my hair but it's a wake up call for the boys tour mornings! I think we equally fight for the shower!

What are the plans for Skarlett Riot in 2015?

To build our profile and tour/push this EP as much as possible. We want to experience touring to the full and develop a wider fan-base. We head out on tour with Ozzy Osbourne guitarist Gus G in February in the UK and then we play with Kamelot in March!

With the imminent release of the intriguingly titled' 'Turtles All The Way Down' from American conceptual Prog Metallers Odin's Court, main man Matt Brookins took the time to chat to Mike Ainscoe about the new album and what's in the pipeline for Odin's Court.

With a track record of Odin's Court work focusing very much on conceptual albums Matt started by talking about their way of working:

"All our past albums were planned as concepts from the beginning, but this one was not. In fact, I had initially been writing with no theme in mind. One day this concept came to me, and once I had an idea for the album, I went back to the music and started refining it. I'm glad I did, because I do personally find it easier to work with a concept album."

Having said that, the concept for the new album is quite an expansive one, addressing ideas and questions about the universe.

"I spend a lot of time musing about the universe, and I enjoy reading popular physics books. So while the topic is quite massive in scope, the feelings and lyrics are very personal and deeply intimate. They are all based on my life and my contemplations."

Narrowing down the topics into three themes – 'Universe', 'Life' and 'Everything' – from such a huge starting point obviously provided a challenge.

"The subject matter is obviously vast and I gave a nod to one of my favourite writers – Douglas Adams. I find that all topics, no matter how obscure, can fit nicely into one of these three areas. Say I am writing about a yellow bulldozer, Vogons, a nice girl I met at a party who left with a two-headed guy, or I remembered my towel? Well, all three fit!"

With such an expansive concept, it begged the question of whether it was tempting to go all out with a double album as befits the subject.

"Absolutely! In fact, there is a little more than two albums' worth of material that was written for this project. Personally I found so much of it to be strong that at one point, the idea was to make it a double album! Instead, I thought focus was needed to get it out in a reasonable time and still hit a high mark of quality. So a collection of songs that seem to flow together the best was further refined and planned for the release. The remainder, and other songs still in progress, will likely end up on 'Volume II' with the same title – assuming people respond well enough to this release!"

The concept aside, one of the attractions of the album is the intriguing title and artwork.

"The title refers to 'infinite recursion' and is from an old story with debatable origins. The gist of it is every time you solve the meaning for how something works, there is a new problem to solve with that solution. It's the 'unmoved mover' paradox… so if the world is resting on a giant turtle shell, on what is that turtle resting? Another turtle of course. And so on. It's turtles all the way down!

"The cover was commissioned for JP Fournier, who lives in France. Similar to the music, I had a very specific concept in mind which I discussed with him and encouraged artistic interpretation. He had some good ideas to take the concept and make it better. The whole package is great, so I hope people opt for the CD over the digital version. The front and rear of the booklet are attached and turned out beautifully. Thematically, the front and rear covers speak of human knowledge increasing and how individuals may react when their long held beliefs are challenged by new discoveries. There is not a right or wrong answer, but we all process it differently depending on our point of view. The characters on the front and rear covers speak to this."

Listening to the album, 'Box Of Dice (Does God Play?)' in particular stands out as closing the album in quite an epic way compared with the rest of the songs.

"From a production standpoint, I thought it would be an enjoyable experience to have a collection of concise songs that both stand alone and contribute to a whole, but I wanted an epic ending. I'm a huge lover of Classical music, and Progressive Rock as well, and pieces are often long in those genres. So the intention was to end it with a big feel, both in length and sonic size. Hopefully listeners feel that when they listen to the entire album."

With Dimetrius LaFavors having joined on vocals (he's been called "the final/missing piece"), he seems to have bedded in as a fully fledged member of the band.

"I still marvel at the fact that LaFavors wasn't involved with an original project earlier in his career. Not to say he isn't experienced, because he has a lifetime of performing live with cover bands doing difficult material. But I feel like the world should have discovered him years ago. Either way, doing the previous album, which was kind of an anthology of old songs redone with him, was a good experience to ease him into studio recording and the world of original compositions. He was much more comfortable with recording this time around, and you can hear it in his voice! In terms of the writing process, I did all the lyrics this time around, but I hope to involve him in the future. With the melodies, I had demoed the songs myself with his voice in mind, and I sent them to him to listen. I then asked him to experiment with them to see what he would come up with. In the studio, we did a back and forth thing. He'd try it how I recorded the demo. He'd try it how he experimented with it then I allowed the producer to decide what options best fit the songs in the end. But no matter what, the emotion he poured into his voice astounds me!"

With the album done and dusted, 2015 looks like being a busy year for Odin's Court with plenty of ideas in place and on the drawing board.

"We will do two shows in the mid-Atlantic as CD release parties then we have a mini-tour for the northeast coast with another U.S.A. based band around May. We are planning on a small southeast coast U.S.A. run in the summer. I really hope to get to Europe one day too, as there seems to be more interest in the type of music we produce there compared to here in the States. We will also start recording the follow up to this album so regardless of what does or doesn't happen, we will have a super busy year coming up!"

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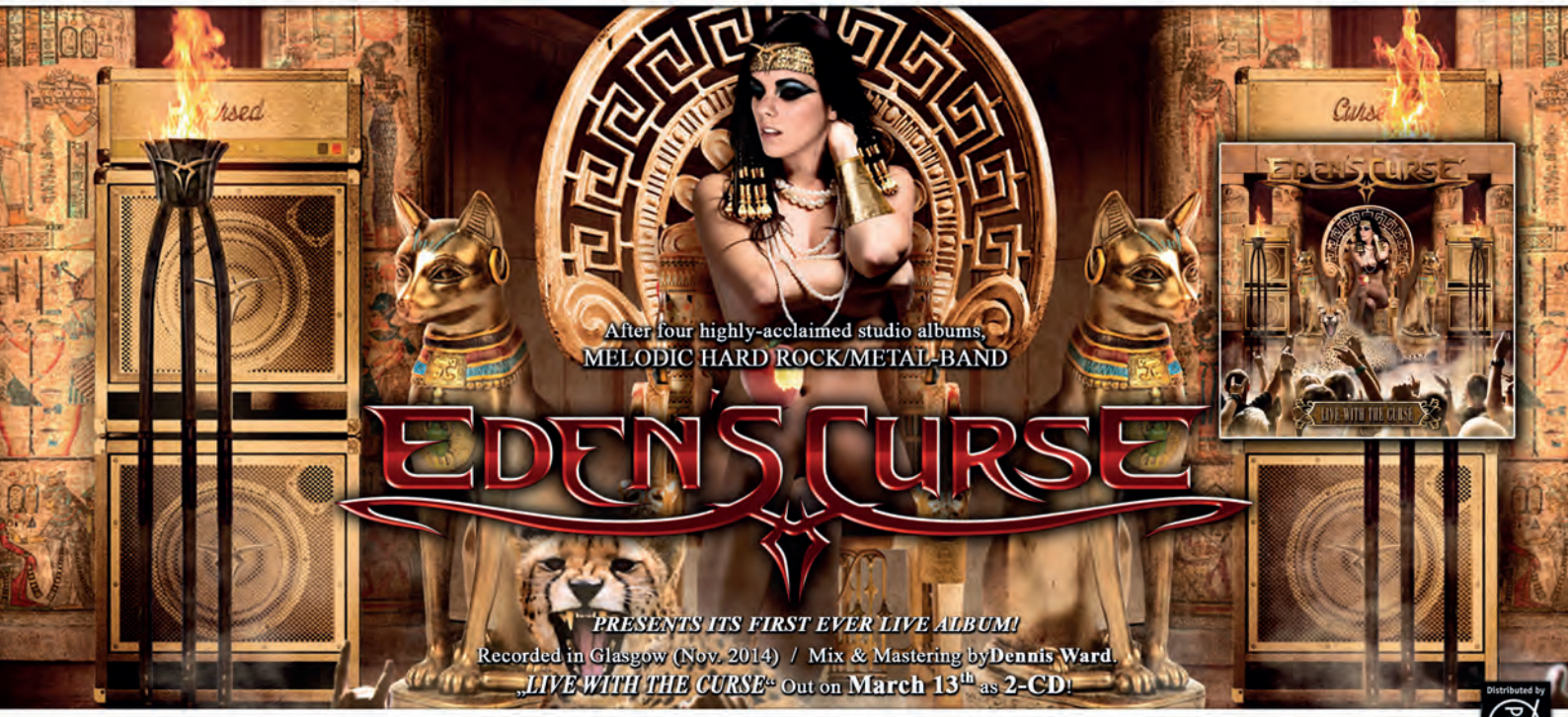

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